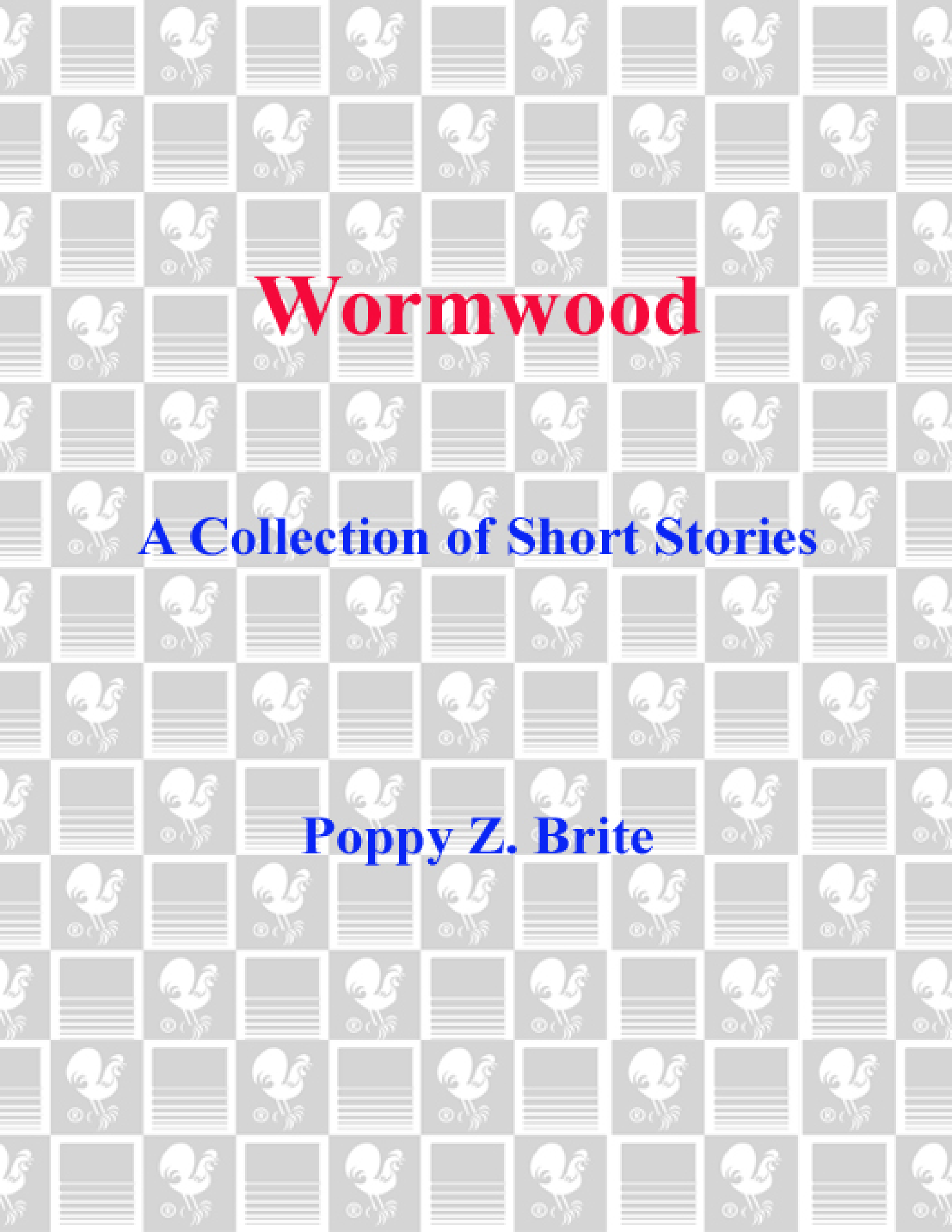




Wormwood

A Collection of Short Stories

Poppy Z. Brite

THE SLICE OF THE RAZOR.
THE BLACK BLOOD.
THE BLISS.

A thin river of blood trickled from between the rear wheels of the truck, cutting a path through the oil and grit on the floor, staining the concrete. The windows of the garage were opaque with moonlight. The windshields, the metal of the tools, glowed faintly blue. The moonlight turned the blood black.

Ghost saw the twins then, jammed together in the corner behind the pickup, naked, their feral faces and narrow chests and broomstick legs slicked with blue-white light, spattered with wet black blood. The raw weals of their shoulders, their scarred flat shoulders, were pressed together, their blood flowing into the gashes they had inflicted upon each other. Their faces were smooth and innocent and utterly blissful....

HIGH PRAISE FOR
POPPY Z. BRITE'S NOVELS
DRAWING BLOOD

“As with many of today’s best writers of horror fiction, Brite focuses more on character interaction than on spooks. The prose in this book runs like a river; an astute observer of the human condition, Brite has given the haunted-house story a thorough remodeling. This is a sexy, classy, frequently funny side of psychological horror.”

—*Booklist*

“[A] spicy gumbo of subcultural hipness simmered in a cauldron of modern horror fiction ... lusty stylings ... emphasize[s] the diversity in everyday exotica while her sensual descriptions intoxicate the reader.... Every page of Brite’s work stresses the beautiful and heartbreaking strangeness of the world.”

—*Fangoria*

“Brite comes into her own in this second novel that should establish her as not only an adept in the horror genre, but also as a singularly talented chronicler of her generation.... Subplots and secondary characters ... serve to evoke a certain 20-something, cyberpunk-era Zeitgeist that resonates with the concerns of contemporary youth.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“[Brite] developed the characters in *Drawing Blood* so well that by the time the book was done they felt like old friends.”

—Charles DeLint

LOST SOULS

*Nominated for the Bram Stoker Award for Best First Novel of 1992 by
the Horror Writers of America*

“A MAJOR NEW VOICE IN HORROR FICTION!”

—*Booklist*

“Poppy Z. Brite combines the sensibilities of a poet with the unflinching eye of a surgeon ... not merely a rising literary star, she is a full-fledged supernova who may well banish paler constellations and make us all far too fond of the night.... This young writer takes us to places few will have the courage to visit and none would dare to tour alone. Brite’s vision is disturbingly dark, deliriously erotic, sweetly savage, and uniquely her own.”

—Dan Simmons

“Poppy Z. Brite strikes out into new uncharted lands with a bold original voice; if you don’t like her stories, then you haven’t read them.”

—Kathryn Ptacek, *Women of Darkness*

“Brite creates a convincing, evocative atmosphere in which youthful alienation meets gothic horror.... *Lost Souls* will surely be devoured by genre aficionados.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“The strengths of *Lost Souls* are evident from the start. Brite has a mastery of atmosphere and setting ... her prose borders on the poetic, her dialogue rings of authenticity, giving a satisfying blend of surrealistic description and gritty realism.”

—*Today Newspapers*

Also by Poppy Z. Brite

DRAWING BLOOD

LOST SOULS

Wormwood

*A Collection of
Short Stories*



**POPPY Z.
BRITE**

A DELL BOOK

Formerly titled *Swamp Foetus*

Published by
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Formerly titled *Swamp Foetus*

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To the memory of Alcohol

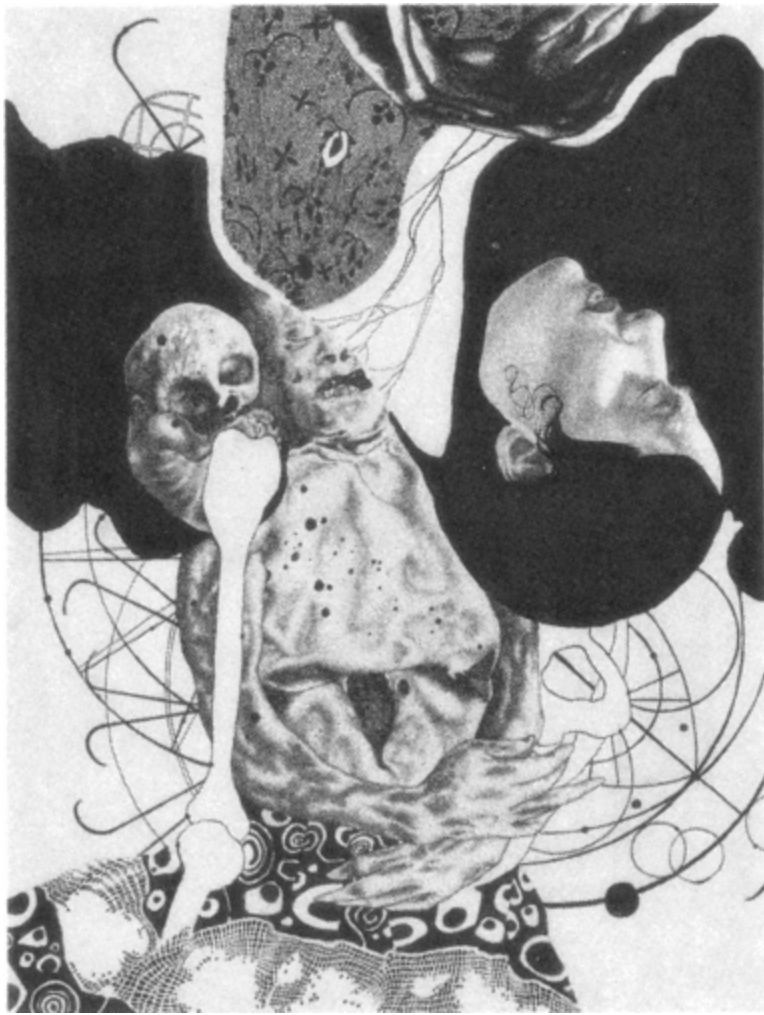
My dear lost love.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In addition to everyone mentioned in the following Introduction, thanks are due to the editors who originally bought and published the stories (particularly David B. Silva of *The Horror Show*), to the reviewers (Ed Bryant, Charles DeLint, Linda Marotta), who said kind things about them, to Tom Monteleone and Borderlands Press for conceiving and incubating *Swamp Foetus*, to my agent, Richard Curtis, and to Monica and Michael as always.

The date appearing after each story refers to when it was written, not when it was published. There is a long gap in at least one case. The stories are not arranged in anything resembling chronological order, but this way anyone who is interested can puzzle out the sequence of them.

Love and Slack,
P. Z. B.



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A Prolegomena to Any Future metaphysics of Poppy

An Introduction by Dan Simmons

1. In Which We Ask the General Question: Is the Function of the Traditional Introduction Archaic and Obsolete?

Well sure it is. Isn't it? Doesn't the very idea of one writer "introducing" another writer to the reader smack of hoop skirts and stickpins and a basic Victorian sensibility that is as dead as Barnaby Rudge's mother's cat? Readers who buy books near the end of the Twentieth Century have no more need of genteel introductions to new writers than Martin Luther required the intercessionary meddlings of priests selling indulgences out of back-alley booths.

Readers in the Brave New World of the discount decade (1992—1995—1999, etc.) are willing to pay their money and take their chances, minus formal introductions or other Victorian niceties.

So why am I writing this to introduce Poppy Z. Brite to you?

Well, speaking for myself, which is all I ever do, I'm volunteering this introduction for precisely the same reason that I went to a picnic of friends and colleagues early in the summer of 1977 and raved about a new and relatively unknown movie I had just seen. "It's fun!" I said. "It's different. It's really a return to a kind of exciting movie-making that I haven't seen in years. Go see it!"

"What's the name of this film?" asked my friends. (Beware of amateur auteurs who refer to movies as "films.")

"Star Wars," I said.

"Ah ..." they sniffed dismissively, returning to their Brie. "Sci-fi."

And that was that.

But, never one to be discouraged from a worthy enthusiasm, I'm back to tell you all about Poppy Z. Brite. Infinitely darker and more intelligent than all the Star Wars movies ever made, her work still packs the excitement of something new under the sun ... or in this case, something new under the dark of the moon.

2. Wherein We Ask the Question: Who is Poppy Z. Brite and Why Is She Doing These Terrible Things to Our Heads?

Look for no Patti Davis-style revelations here. If there is the usual short author's bio in the back of this book, then you and I know about the same amount about Poppy Z. Brite. Even though I have met Poppy twice (details to come), I know little more about this enigmatic figure than the details on her brief bio sheet that lies by my keyboard even as I write.

"Born in 1967 ..."—Can this be? Are there really professional writers out there—especially brilliant and accomplished ones like Poppy Z. Brite—who were *born* in 1967?

I have *ties* older than this kid ...

"... has worked as a gourmet candy maker, an artist's model, a cook, a mouse caretaker, and an exotic dancer."—Shades of the good-old Jack London days when writers had *lived* before they sat down to write. Now the obligatory author's bio usually reads "Ms. Termuggli is a recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship, two NEA Foundation grants, the Lizzie Borden NOW Award for Politically Correct Fiction Involving Activist Women, and the Breadloaf Ms. Congeniality Runners-up Trophy ... Ms. Termuggli teaches feminist deconstructionist theory and postmodernist plotless fiction technique at Whazzituya Community College."

No, Poppy Z. Brite has *had a life!* But ... born in 1967? How many generations of mice could she have caretaken? How many exotic dances could she have shimmied through? And what, I ask (admitting my shocking naivete), is "gourmet candy?"

“Her other interests include Asian culture and religion (she is a particular fan of the goddess Kali), New Orleans hoodoo and other forms of folk magic—” These facts become self-evident as one reads the fiction of Poppy Z. Brite. New Orleans is a hulking, rotting, brooding, dripping presence in much of her fiction, and although her bio goes on to say that she is currently a resident of Georgia, one senses that this is an aberration. (Her residency there is an aberration, that is, not the state of Georgia. Although some have argued that case eloquently ...) Brite’s fiction is redolent with the dark magic and darker decay of the bayou and the wrought-iron-shadowed alleys of New Orleans. She evokes these places with a power that would—just taken by itself—put her far out ahead of the great herd of new writers clamoring for your attention.

Finally, the bio sheet I am looking at has an element that your version of the book may not include. It is a photograph of the author. She is supine on a bed ... or perhaps it is a marble altar draped with white linen. A triangle of light behind her head may be a New Age halo or the scatter from a radiant crystal. Or perhaps just a right-angled shaft of sunlight. The author is nude from the waist up, but she is holding a ferret across her breasts. The photocopied photograph is not terribly clear, and it took hours of patient photoanalysis to ascertain that the ferret is not a cuddly, stuffed, Steifl-type ferret, but a real live, domesticated, red-eyed, albinic variety of the polecat such as those used in Europe for driving rabbits and rats from their burrows. The author is looking at the ferret. The ferret is looking at the camera.

Shadows and the camera angle do not show the inevitable claw marks or the delicate drops of blood on the pale flesh, but the imagination supplies such details with almost alarming alacrity. But this is sexist and irrelevant and no ... I will not send you a copy of the photograph ... don’t ask.

And finally, there is the name: Poppy Z. Brite. One has trouble imagining, in even the wildest flights of Aquarian-age 1967 fancy, the proud Brite parents christening a defenseless infant Poppy Z. One assumes therefore that this name was, in the tradition of Mark

Twain and Malcolm X, an active choice, an assumption of persona ... a declaration of personality.

Then again, one might be full of shit. One can only be sure that it is none of one's business. One moves on.

3. In Which We Ask the Rhetorical Question: How Did We Meet the Author?

The first time I met Poppy Z. Brite was at a booksigning in Atlanta, Georgia. She was the one patient enough to stand in line to have a book inscribed. I was the one oafish enough not to recognize her name as a writer already published in magazines such as *The Horror Show*. She said kind things about this author's book; this author made effusive apologies for not having read her stuff and offered solemn (and hypocritical) vows to seek it out. End of first meeting.

The second encounter was more enlightening.

In April of 1991 I was at a science-fiction convention cum literary conference hosted by SUNY at Stony Brook on Long Island. The organizers and audiences were enthusiastic, the contingent of writers and other professionals present was impressive, but the rest of the trip was—to use a polite phrase—Dante-esque.

On my part I'd flown to the conference with the first ear infection I'd ever had. In functional terms, this meant that while I was now at sea level, my inner ear had chosen to stay pressurized at Colorado altitude of 5,280 feet. The effect was not dissimilar to having an icepick permanently lodged through the eardrum.

To add to this distraction, the university building at Stony Brook was a massive, ugly, Orwellian heap of pre-stressed concrete that looked as if it had been slapped together by Soviet contractors on a bad day. The inside reminded me of the Evil One's castle of cement Lego blocks in *Time Bandits*: dark, dirty, depressing, and drippy on the inside when it rained. It rained the entire time of the conference. Water dripped on the cheap plastic chairs in classrooms, puddled

under tables, splashed on the heads of presenters, and pooled in little septic quagmires in the halls. All in all, the place had the feeling of a Blade Runner set without the charm. Naturally the acoustics were comparable to those in Carlsbad Caverns and no one dared turn on a microphone for fear of being electrocuted in the drizzle.

It was two days into this grim marathon, I'd just finished a panel discussion on some obtuse topic, the pain from the ear infection had just reached the point where the only sane course of action was to grab a scoped-in hunting rifle, climb a tower, and take out as many undergraduates as possible before the SWAT team brought you down, and a writer on the panel (John Skip if you must know the details) said, "Poppy Brite's doing a reading right after this. Want to go?"

Actually, I'd been waiting to hear Harlan Ellison's reading that hour. Harlan's readings never disappointed, and the story he was presenting was a new one. The main hall already had a thousand people jostling for seats and more were coming. My heart sank for Poppy Z. Brite, whoever she was. It's hard enough for a new writer to find listeners at public readings; to be counterprogrammed against Harlan Ellison was ridiculous.

"Sure," I said to Skip. "I'd like to hear her read."

And so I went. The reading was in a room not even on the program guide map, tucked under the stairs in what may have been a cloakroom. I think there were six people there. I may have been the only member of the audience not wearing black leather and chains.

Poppy Z. Brite's voice is soft, melodious, almost shy-sounding. But there was nothing shy or retiring about her prose. The story she read that day was "Calcutta: Lord of Nerves." It was about zombies.

First, I must say that I dislike zombie stories on principle. Secondly, I should admit that I once wrote about Calcutta and feel rather proprietary about it. (How dare this whippersnapper—born in 1967!—write about *my* city!) Finally, I have to admit that the ear

infection had ratcheted up from an icepick-in-the-ear level to something approaching the hot-darning-needle-in-the-brain setting. Between the water dripping, the Carlsbad acoustics, the rustle of chains in the dark, and the cascade of pain, it was hard to concentrate.

For the first thirty seconds or so.

The story she read was simply one of the most powerful pieces of imaginative fiction I had ever heard. This short, melodious-voiced young woman with the Raggedy Ann stockings and the violet hair pulled me out of Stony Brook and the haze of pain and the Western Hemisphere and brought me to places in Calcutta (and in myself) that I had not—and *could not have*—imagined to exist.

It was brilliant and dark and infinitely tragic and powerfully precise. Poppy Z. Brite was reading a tale about zombies in a George Romero world, but the story was *really* about a place on our planet where a few million wandering ghouls would go effectively unnoticed, where decaying zombies could easily be confused for the lepers already there, and where Kali has always ruled and always will. More than that, it was a riveting tale of sex and decay and the darkest kind of love where passion and violence are the same thing.

I don't remember what I said to her after the reading. I know I babbled. I'm only sure of one part of the conversation—in my stunned state, I must have promised John Skip, who was standing nearby, a zombie story for his upcoming *Still Dead* anthology because he called some months later and asked when it would be ready. Obviously I had forgotten that I hate zombies and zombie stories. I think I forgot my name for a while after listening to Poppy's story that day. All I wanted to do was go somewhere quiet and relatively dry and think about the images she had steamrolled me with.

But I had no place quiet or dry. Twenty minutes later I was on a panel with Harlan, Gahan Wilson, and several other talented people, all emoting with high energy while I sat there mute, still reacting to the Poppy Z. Brite story. In the middle of an energetic exchange,

Harlan wheeled on me and said, “Simmons, you haven’t contributed anything to this argument. What do you think?”

I had no idea what we were discussing.

I paused a minute, decided not to fake it, turned to the audience of a hundred or so pale faces waiting patiently in the dripping gloom, and said, “Let me tell you about a story I just heard ...”

Which brings us full circle.

4. Where the Real Reason for This Introduction Is Revealed.

I think you should read Poppy Z. Brite. She is a writer of immense talent and incredible potential. Her work may be described—perhaps even by her—as “splatterpunk,” but it is not. Splatter-punk fiction is an energetic but limited phenomenon which has had its day and run its course. Poppy Brite’s fiction, however vicious, erotic, or viciously erotic it can be, will continue to mature and confound and horrify and delight for many years to come. Her earliest work had a distinctive voice; her most recent work is finding a voice so confident and unique that the rest of us can only watch and marvel.

My friends tell me that I am fond of quoting Joseph Conrad, so I will repeat a Conradian comment—“The writer of imaginative prose stands confessed in his works.”

And what has Poppy Z. Brite confessed to us in these stories?

She has confessed that she is not only a sensuous person, a woman alive to her senses, but—a more rare phenomenon—a writer who can communicate the full range of sensory experience to the reader. Witness these casual celebrations of scent in “Missing,” a story which begins and ends with the evocative power of smells:

“In the street the smell was the grease-dripping odor of frying oysters, the sharp scent of oil paints and turpentine left behind by the street artists who had all gone home hours ago ... (In the room was) the fruity odor of the wine and the tangy private scent of their

sweat ... The day smelled of coconut suntan lotion and seafood being deepfried in hot oil.”

And Poppy Z. Brite has confessed in her prose that she has that rare prose-stylist’s ability to paint subtle and complex settings by selecting a few perfect details. This from “Xenophobia”:

“... we got off at the wrong stop and found ourselves in the porn district. The light of the setting sun was as red as desire. X’s paraded across every marquee. The poster girls’ nipples and lipstick had long since faded to a dusty orange.”

And finally, Poppy Z. Brite has confessed through her works that she has that most sought-after writer’s ability—the skill of capturing human characterization in language that approaches poetry in its simplicity. From “The Georgia Story”:

“Hollow-eyed Gene and sharp-faced prettyboy Sammy shared a room and a rum-stained mattress, and created drifting gray mountains of cigarette ash every day. Each tried to outdo the other’s thinness, and they wrote Freudian lyrics together, Gene with his vampire face, Sammy with long tangled sparkles of hair as glossy as ravens, with knowing green eyes that darkened in the presence of pain—ours or his own.”

There are more confessions, of course, and more examples to be shared—but this is where I leave and you take over. There remains only this ...

5. Wherein the Introduction Is Made.

Listen carefully, because smart money is betting that this will be the last time that Poppy Z. Brite will ever have to be introduced to readers. After this, says the smart money, readers will be introducing themselves to Ms. Brite in ever-increasing hordes.

So listen carefully. If you miss it, I’m not going to repeat myself.

It is my great pleasure to introduce to you a very fine writer, Poppy Z. Brite.

There. It's done. You can read on and find what you came for now.

I don't think you'll be disappointed.

Dan Simmons

Longmont, Colorado



Angels

I. Ghost

“Can’tcha see the time is here for us to find ... Rivers, mountains, nothin’ can be far behind ... Can’tcha see ... You gotta find out this one for yourself ... Can’tcha see ...”

Throaty Carolina voice full of gravel and gold, growling deep, rising to a fluttering crescendo that skimmed over the terrible guitar playing. Coat-hanger wire across the strings, angels smashing their harps! Steve glanced in the rear view mirror and said, “How in hell did you ever manage to get it that far out of tune?”

“It’s not out of tune. Listen.” Ghost twisted his fingers around the neck of Steve’s guitar and strummed what Steve supposed was meant to be a chord. It rang through the car, vibrating the glass and metal, raising dust from the seats until Steve rolled his window down to let it out and Ghost began to sing again, happily, gloriously massacring the way-back FM hit with the wind whipping long translucent strands of hair across his eyes. “Amy ... whatcha gonna do ... Ameeeeeee ... I kin stay with you ...”

Forty miles later, past gas stations with killer bears caged in the back, past checkerboard fields of wheat and tobacco, past telephone poles that stood like stark crucifixes against the sky, the T-bird belched forth masses of angry steam, coughed, and stopped.

Steve busied himself under the hood for a while, cussing and hurting his hands on the hot metal while Ghost strummed and sang to him from the back seat. When Ghost said “Heads up” and tossed him a Bud from their little cooler, Steve ran his sore hands through the fringe of dark hair that hung over his forehead and eyes. Strands of his hair stood out in loops and angles, stiff with engine grease. “It

is beyond my powers,” Steve said. “It is cursed, old Ghost, it is fuckin’ cursed. We need a phone.”

Ghost got out of the car. His pale eyes turned skyward and lit upon strands of telephone wires trailing away over the rises and misty falls of the road. He stood swaying gently for a moment, his hands trembling at his sides, his mind travelling the wires. Then he shook himself, turned in a circle, and said, “See that church over there? There’s a path back behind it and we go through the cemetery and the woods, and there’s a big house up on a rise.”

They trailed through the cemetery, casting long shadows over the softly rotting gray stones and the bright patches of grass and earth and sunlight, still sipping from cans that dripped foam and amber sparkles caught by the sun. Steve wiped his hands on a red bandanna. Ghost, still humming his song, caught the tops of the tall weeds between his fingers and let them slip away again. Burrs clung to the cuffs of Steve’s jeans and Ghost’s gray wash pants, and Steve began to whistle.

The twins sat on the front lawn in the cool mud of their wishing well, tracking the travellers’ progress for ten minutes before the swish of leaf-laden branches and the crunch of pine needles could be heard from the overgrown path in the woods. When the travellers’ shadows wavered around the bend in the instant before they would come into view of the lawn, the twins each pulled up a handful of grass and tiny blue starflowers, flung them into the wishing well, and darted under the front porch. Two pairs of yellowy-green eyes peered out; two heads leaned together, whispering about the cracked leather of Steve’s cowboy boots and the purple Magic Marker drawings on Ghost’s white sneakers.

Ghost stopped to look at a muddy spot on the lawn, a shallow hole carefully outlined by rocks. Rough gray stones bordered the red clay gash in the scrubby grass; lines of smaller white pebbles radiated out, half-embedded like teeth in the patchy lawn, a sunburst in stone. Gently, Ghost traced a line of pebbles with the toe of his sneaker.

“What’s that?” asked Steve.

“Little hole in the ground. There’s flowers in here, Steve. And pennies.”

“Trash heap, maybe. Listen, we ought to get rid of these brews before we knock on their door.”

They set the beer cans down in the shade of the porch steps. Out of the corner of his eye, Ghost saw two small, stick-thin, spidery hands creep out from under the porch and snatch them. He got down on his hands and knees and tried to peer between the boards. Rotten leaves, patches of sun and shadow ... a small hand, scuttling out of sight.

A kid answered Steve’s knock and looked up at him through a curtain of auburn hair as brilliant as a robin’s breast. The kid was in his late teens, perhaps, only a couple of years younger than Steve, but smaller and shyer; he said nothing but “H’lo” and stepped back to let Steve in. Steve glanced back at Ghost on his knees, his eye to a chink in the porch, his hand searching in his pocket. Ghost pulled out a shiny dime and dropped it through the chink.

“Saw the twins, prob’ly,” said the kid. Steve shrugged and stepped into the foyer.

Ghost had been right; the house was big. It was also damp, and dim, and full of the presence of Jesus. His picture hung huge in the front hallway, eyes as sad and wise as a basset hound’s, hands outspread in benediction. When Steve looked at it from a different angle, the palms oozed blood. The wallpaper was velveteen-flocked maroon blotched with water stains. The ceiling hung heavy with plaster fruit, ivy leaves, dull-eyed cupids.

When Steve explained about the T-bird, the kid brightened. “I might be able to fix it. I can, sometimes.”

“She’s a perverse old whore,” Steve warned him. “She’d as soon pop her radiator cap in your face as look at you. Maybe we better just call the junkyard.”

Ghost, letting himself into the foyer, heard this. “Steve, you won’t let that old car go until the back end falls off. Let’s go back and get our stuff, at least. If we’re going to be here long, I want to practice the guitar.” Steve groaned. They stepped back out onto the porch, and Ghost caught his breath. “Look. They came out.”

The twins were crouched next to the wishing well, their heads bent over the muddy hole. Their shadows spilled across the grass, black and twisted. When they turned, Steve, who was a year older than Ghost and sometimes protective, couldn’t help grabbing his friend’s wrist and pulling him back.

The two small figures on the lawn had gleaming eyes shadowed by bone and pallor. Their faces were ferally delicate. Their bare chests were bony little hollows covered with white skin, and the shoulders they pressed together were raw, pink, puckered ... and somehow so misshapen, so *wrong*, that Steve could not at once grasp the nature of their deformity.

The twins stared for a moment, still hunched over their wishing well. Then they darted and were gone—whether into the woods, around the house, or back under the porch, Steve wasn’t sure. He glanced nervously behind him and said, “What ...”

“It happened right after they were born,” the kid told him. “They came out of Mama’s belly grown together. Nearly ripped her open. She had to have thirty stitches. The twins were born with one arm each, Michael’s on the right and Samuel’s on the left, and the doctor cut them apart at the shoulder.”

Steve stared at the spot where the twins had been, seeing again the twisted little shapes, their way of leaning on each other, shoulder to truncated shoulder. He tried to think of something to say, and could only come up with “Sorry.”

Ghost closed his eyes and followed Steve and the kid through the woods, letting his feet find their own way along the path, seeing by the ragged light that filtered through his eyelids. He imagined himself tender, tiny, naked, barely formed, protected only by the being whose bone and blood and soul were fused with his. He felt

the cold pain of the knife, the hot, slicing agony of the cutting apart. A whimper escaped him, a tiny sound of aloneness.

“Huh?” said Steve, turning.

Ghost opened his eyes. “Nothing.”

When they reached the T-bird, Ghost got Steve’s guitar out again. Steve and the kid stuck their heads under the hood and began speaking with enthusiasm about the perversity of cars. Ghost listened to them for a few minutes, half-smiling at the inanity of car talk. Then he walked back through the woods to the house and sat on the porch steps and played all the songs he knew. He sang them loudly and joyously, making up what words he couldn’t remember, and he was moaning an accompaniment to a strange wordless song that had suddenly possessed his fingers when the twins tumbled around the corner of the house, mops of dark hair wet and tousled, bodies dripping, faces streaked with water or tears. The scars on their shoulders stood out vivid and angry against their paleness.

The twins were naked, and Ghost realized they were older than he’d thought: their crotches were dusted with soft dark velvet, though there, as elsewhere, they were underdeveloped and small. When they saw Ghost they fell to the ground, huddling, trying to shield each other with their single arms.

Ghost reached for them, wanting to gather them to him, give them something to cling to. When he saw the terror in their faces he stopped, forced himself to put his hands back on the guitar. “What happened to you all?” he asked.

“She gave us a bath,” one of the twins said finally, spitting the words out, staring at the guitar.

“Who, your mother? Why doesn’t she let you lick yourselves clean? That’s what my grandmother used to do—or let me take mud baths.”

Smiles wavered and died on the twins’ lips. Ghost watched them gravely for a moment, then began to play the strange song again, plucking the notes from the strings, letting them fall and shatter like drops of colored water, throwing his head back and wailing sounds

that were nearly words. When one of the twins reached up to touch the silver inlays on the guitar, Ghost didn't stop playing. The song grew wilder and stranger, pulling Ghost's fingers across the strings. It separated into long ribbons of sound and merged again into washes that encircled the twins, drew them closer, pulled them to their feet still leaning against each other.

They placed their hands together, the lines and hills of their palms interlocking like a puzzle of flesh. They bowed their heads until their foreheads were touching and then they swayed apart and began to dance, circling, pressing flat together along the length of their little bodies as if they would merge once more, clutching at each other with childish lust and desperation, spinning away and pulling each other back, skinny poetry, music of flesh and bone. The music rose and spiralled.

All at once they were upon Ghost, their faces sticky against his, their hands finding his heartbeat. Ghost managed to shove the guitar aside before they pushed him back onto the steps, his lips sticky with their bitter tears and sour-sweet spit. For a moment he hid behind the darkness of his eyelids and let it happen: the warmth of their soft peachflesh, the tangy soapy smell of their bodies, their music-driven passion.

But resentment and terror of outsiders stiffened their hands, made their fingers hard and sharp. Teeth found the hollow of Ghost's throat and a bright, wet pain bloomed there.

Then their weight was gone from him and he was alone on the steps, only the neck of the guitar in his hands, only its cold smooth body pressed against his. A faint keening came from under the porch.

"Mister?" said a small worried voice. "The twins didn't hurt you, did they? They wouldn't hurt anybody, not on purpose." Ghost looked up. The twins' older brother had returned. Behind him stood Steve, oil-smudged and besweatted, his long muscles tensed, ready to kill anything that had assaulted Ghost.

"I'm not hurt," Ghost told them, watching their faces.

“Your neck, Ghost,” said Steve quietly, “there in the V.” Ghost put his hand to his collarbone and drew it away sticky, violet with his blood.

II. Brother

The twins were almost fifteen when the angel came and took them away.

No one else in the family ever really loved the twins. And the twins didn't love any of us either. Maybe that's why they were so angry at having been cut apart.

The twins' names were Michael and Samuel, good names, an archangel and a prophet. But nobody ever called them by those names, and if anybody did, the twins never answered. To us they were just the twins, more than one person, not quite two, separated at the shoulder the day after they were born and nearly bled to death. God's will be done.

The day they came home from the hospital, Mama hung a picture of Jesus in their room and put them to sleep in their two little cribs. They yelled all day and all night and all of the next day. Mama thought Jesus's eyes that glowed in the dark were scaring the twins, so she took the picture down, but the twins kept yelling until she put them in a crib together.

After that they had to sleep in the same bed all night, every night, forever—else they would scream just like they had as newborns. Mama took in the town's mending and dressmaking, and the twins slept in her sewing room among heaps of fabric and crackling tissue patterns, their dreams zigzagged by the whine of the electric sewing machine.

The twins learned to crawl one-armed, a fast scuttle down the hall, over the cabbage rose rug that skinned their knees in the living room. They learned how to pull themselves up, hanging onto each other. If they leaned on each other, they could take a few steps. They wouldn't come to Mama when she held out her arms, or to

Daddy or me either. They hung onto each other and toddled in circles, holding each other up, pulling each other down when they fell.

The twins ate our food and slept in the bed we gave them and let us keep them clean, but we existed only in a tiny corner of their world, a corner reserved for such things as clothes and dinner and the hated baths. When I got old enough to discover the gift God had given me for fixing car engines, they would sometimes come out to the shed and watch me work on some neighbor's junker. Mostly they ran free in the woods and lived under the porch, playing the games they made up inside their heads. They loved to dance in ritualistic patterns, stepping and bobbing and circling. At the end they would clutch each other tight as ticks, howling if anybody tried to pull them apart.

The twins wouldn't talk until the summer they were five and I was eight. We prayed for them every Sunday in church. Mama even sent away for some holy oil. It came in little plastic packets like ketchup in a restaurant, and Mama rubbed the twins' throats with it whenever she caught them sitting still, but they didn't talk until they were good and ready.

The picture of that summer kitchen, ninety degrees by the Silks Motor Oil thermometer in the window, stays in my head as bright-colored and underwater still and clear as the 3-D scenes in the special Bible Mama got from TV. The twins were sitting at the kitchen table eating peanut butter out of the jar. The peanut butter was soft and caramel-runny around the edges of the jar, and the twins' faces were smeared with warm tan goo. Mama was getting a can of potted ham out of the cabinet to make me a sandwich.

A fly crawled in through the hole at the bottom of the screen door, made electric loops around the kitchen, and landed on the rim of the peanut butter jar. The twins watched the fly for a second, until it got stuck in the melting peanut butter and began to struggle. Then one twin—Michael—turned around in his chair, looked right at Mama, and said, "What made you think we wanted to be cut apart, anyway?"

Mama's fingers had just closed around the can of ham. Her hand jerked. I watched the can tumble down and thump from the countertop to the floor. It bounced once and rolled to rest against the side of the plastic trash can. Michael pulled the fly out of the peanut butter, wiped it in a smear of wings and legs and brown stickiness on the edge of the table, and picked up his spoon again.

"I don't want them around me," Mama said flatly, later, and the twins were moved out of Mama's sewing room and into an upstairs guest room which they said was too cold and haunted, and finally into my room. They said they would not sing at night if I would take down the Bible pictures Mama had given me, and we lived in peace.

They were five then.

They were thirteen when Daddy found them in a puddle of blood on the floor of the garage shed. They had a package of razor blades and were huddled near the back wall, behind Daddy's truck, their gashed shoulders pressed together, bleeding into each other. Between them they had to have thirty stitches. I pulled the blanket over my head that night and listened to them whispering in the next bed.

"I thought we'd grow back together," said Michael. "I wasn't going to tell *them* that."

"Now it hurts," mumbled Samuel, close to sleep.

"It always hurt," said Michael. "That place where they cut us apart."

III. Ghost

Ghost dreamed this lifetime, asleep next to Steve in the cold upstairs guest room—a room which *was* haunted, Ghost knew, but only by the sad thin shade of a cat that had starved to death there fifty years ago, shut in and forgotten by a vacationing family.

The kid knew how to fix Steve's T-bird, but could not do the work until sundown because it was a Sunday. By that time it was too late

to hit the road, so the family allowed Steve and Ghost to stay for ten dollars in the upstairs guest room. Ghost lay awake late fingering the small clean bite mark on his throat and feeling the shade of the cat still roaming and listening to Steve's even breathing, the breathing of a man at peace with himself and at truce with the world.

Then Ghost was asleep too. He found himself weaving through the milky thick clouds that often swathed him from the waist down in his dreams. In dreams he seldom saw his feet, though he felt that he was barefoot.

He was crossing the front lawn of the house. He passed the muddy hole in the ground, the hole the twins filled with coins and flowers and called a wishing well, and wondered what they wished for there. He skirted the edge of the woods and covered the thirty feet to the shed behind the house with the instantaneous effortlessness of dreams. He was in the garage. The walls bristled with tools. There was a red pickup truck, the old-fashioned kind whose shape always reminded Ghost of a loaf of bread, and a battered warhorse of a Chevrolet that the twins' brother must work on during the aimless, melting days between the Sundays.

A thin river of blood trickled from between the rear wheels of the truck, cutting a path through the oil and grit on the floor, staining the concrete. The windows of the garage were opaque with moonlight. The windshields, the metal of the tools, glowed faintly blue. The moonlight turned the blood black.

Ghost saw the twins then, jammed together in the corner behind the pickup, naked, their feral faces and narrow chests and broomstick legs slicked with blue-white light, spattered with wet black blood. The raw weals of their shoulders, their scarred flat shoulders, were pressed together, their blood flowing into the gashes they had inflicted upon each other. Their faces were smooth and innocent and utterly blissful.

The slice of the razor. The black blood. The bliss.

“I know what they wish for!” Ghost screamed, waking himself up. Beside him Steve stirred and muttered and pulled all the blankets away, but did not wake. The scream had been only in Ghost’s mind, a dream-scream.

“I know what they wish for,” he whispered, and stared into the darkness for a long time before sitting up.

IV. Brother

The other one was just a kid like me, a little older, a little smarter. But the one called Ghost was an angel. I knew it by the wing of hair that fell like flax over his eyes, and by his skin that light shone through, and by the way his hands shaped the air. And I knew it by what I guess you’d call his aura.

Mrs. Carstairs in our church reads them; she can tell a lot about a person by the color of his aura. The twins, she says, share an aura. It is the purple-black of a bruise, and it surrounds them both, connecting them, no matter how far apart they are. I’ve never seen the twins’ aura, nor any other. But anybody could see the golden light surrounding this Ghost, as translucent and yet as heartbreakingly bright as sunlight sifting through pure dawn clouds on Easter morning.

Ghost had risen.

I couldn’t hear his padding feet in the hall, but I saw that golden light breaking across the darkness before he stepped into our room. He glanced at me and thought I was asleep, then bent over the twins’ bed. He was going to get bitten again, I thought. Worse—he was going to get *clawed*.

But the twins reached up to him as they had never reached for anybody but each other, and Ghost, who must have been stronger than he looked, hoisted a twin in each arm and turned to me. He knew I was awake after all. The twins leaned against him, their heads snuggled into his neck and their hands linked across his chest,

murmuring sleepily. If anybody could save our twins, this angel could.

“God be with you,” I whispered.

Ghost smiled. His face, even in the dark, was radiant.

“Peace,” he said.

V. Ghost

He stashed the twins in the back of the T-bird, told them to wait there until morning, and watched them sink back into the easy rhythm of child-sleep, wrapped in the excellent blanket Steve had swiped from some Holiday Inn. The rest of Ghost’s night was dark and dreamless.

At breakfast the next morning, the doughy mother asked where the twins were and the brother looked at Ghost and said, “They went out to the woods already.” Ghost could almost see the kid’s fingers crossing under the table, protecting himself against the lie. The lumpish father grunted. That was the extent of the breakfast conversation, except when Ghost, referring to the plaster decorations in the front hall, said, “Do you know cupids are pagan?” Steve glared at him. Ghost, oblivious, dipped a biscuit in the savory blandness of chicken gravy.

Ghost kindly offered to load up the car while Steve paid for their room and meal. He made the twins hide on the floor of the back seat under the blanket, where they huddled happily. They didn’t show themselves until noon, when Steve pulled into a truck stop for lunch and a dark head rose over the seat and said, “We’re hungry too.”

“You *are* crazy,” Steve said through a mouthful of coffee, his fifth cup. Enchanted, Ghost watched the twins picking apart a piece of pie, eating only the chunks of apple. “You’ve gone too far this time, man. They’ve got our descriptions. Even with that stupid disguise”—Ghost had draped long-sleeved shirts around the twins’ shoulders—“those kids stand out like a nun in a whore-house. They probably

have my fuckin' license number. We'll be in the county tank before this day is out, Ghost, you bet on it."

"I know. We'll swing for this. Hell, we'll probably get the chair." Ghost smiled, an easy, sweet smile, a smile that made Steve want to give him a bloody lip. "Only I don't think so, Steve. I don't think we're being followed. Seems like you might trust me by now."

Steve opened his mouth. Ghost said, "Who told you Ann would come back to you?" and Steve shut it again, frowned, shook his head. Finally he said, "Just tell me what the hell you want to do with them."

"We're taking them to the city," Ghost said. "And we're going to set them free."

In the city—any city, Ghost had said, and so Steve chose the biggest, most anonymous one he could find—Ghost took the twins out one night and came back alone to their motel. His face was chalky and his eyes were red-rimmed, and he got into Steve's bed and began to sob. Steve held him all night while Ghost dreamed of the ultimate consummation, the rejoining, the flesh melting back to oneness, the holy whole, the denied birthright.

"God be with you," he whispered over and over into the darkness. "God be with you."

VI. Brother

Mama and Daddy never reported the twins stolen. Said they had run off to play one day and never come back. The woods were searched and the ponds dragged; they found a lot of dead things, but no Michael, no Samuel. Mama didn't seem to want the twins back. They had always hated going to church.

A few weeks later we got a letter from the city. The twins were dead, it said. Could we come.

In the city morgue, the twins were a vague blurry lump under a plastic blanket, a lump too large to be one person, too small to be two. I looked at their smooth faces and their bodies crusted with blood as the policeman tried to explain. A crackpot doctor, the kind that uses coathangers to tear babies out of women's wombs in back alleys, had promised the twins he could carry out the operation they wanted. Yes, the doctor was in custody; no, the policeman had no idea where the twins had gotten the money. Angel's money, I thought.

Both twins had died of blood loss. The policeman showed us the crude stitches. Even if they had survived the operation, he said, they would have gotten deadly infections within days—the crackpot's operating room was a hellhole of cockroaches and mold. The policeman made an apologetic joke about the operation being a success even though the patient died. At that, the operation had been a success. The twins certainly were sewn together at the shoulder.

As we headed home, Daddy's face hanging heavy and impassive over the steering wheel, Mama praying loudly in the passenger seat, and the twins following us home in a refrigerated train car, I watched the sky for angels.

1987

A Georgia Story

On a cold January afternoon when the mist was already swirling over the dark ponds in anticipation of evening, I returned to Georgia. Two years and six thousand miles had separated me from the land that was my cradle and, once, my home.

Two years, six thousand miles. Florida and Disneyworld and liquid sunshine oranges, and in the Haunted Castle, a pale-handed figure suspended from an unseen rafter, slowly turning, turning. New Orleans jazz clubs and whores whose makeup made their eyes look bruised, swollen shut, their lips too lush, the taste of rot in their mouths. The long ribbons of shimmering night highway and sand with the radio turned too loud, trying not to see the lights that glowed like half-closed eyes from my dashboard.

Listen: once there were four boys who lived in the top story of a church made of ancient wood and stained glass. The church was abandoned, so no one cared if we lived there; we bathed in summer thunderstorms and stayed dirty in winter and walked with candles at night. Hollow-eyed Gene and sharp-faced prettyboy Sammy shared a room and a rum-stained mattress, and created drifting gray mountains of cigarette ash every day. Each tried to outdo the other's thinness, and they wrote Freudian lyrics together, Gene with his vampire face, Sammy with long tangled sparkles of hair as glossy as ravens, with knowing green eyes that darkened in the presence of pain—ours or his own. At night we heard them through the crumbling walls, with their moans and their biting, and we knew that as long as two creatures in the world still loved each other, we were safe. In the morning their shoulders would be blotched with faint red crescents, their smiles a shade happier.

Gene's singing voice—his vox humana, he called it—plunged from a psychosexual Bowie wail to a guttural croak like the voice of terminal throat cancer. Sammy coaxed cries of pleasure out of a guitar as narrow and flat and shiny as himself. He also painted the walls of our church with murals: black eclipses, cats longer and meaner and more skeletal than any cats were ever meant to be, bowls of crystalline Jell-O like quivering jewels—whatever swam up from the recesses of his mind. He told me once that he mixed a little of his blood with all his paints. I never believed him until I saw him, one night by candlelight, make a shallow razorcut on his forearm and steep his brush in the crimson stream and swirl it into a drop of nightmare black. In that sensual, gory moment I wanted to press my mouth to the gash and drink the nourishment his veins would give me, and I knew Sammy would not mind, if the sweetness of his blood was what I needed. Instead I reached out to touch his painting with my fingertips, and Sammy, smiling, delicately outlined the bones of my hand in bloody black with his brush.

Gene and Sammy clutched each other against the dark when the candles flickered out. Saint (born John St. John) sold grass by the ounce to buy drums. He wore sunglasses at night and *liked* the candles to go out. I was the ordinary one of the bunch, the short-haired boy, so I wrote home and said I wanted to take a business course at a local college. When the money came, I bought a battered bass from a pawnshop. Sammy figured out how to play it and tried hard to show me, but his long thin fingers tipped with chips of black nail polish were more magical than mine. He braided strands of his glittering hair; they fell around his face as he played.

In decaying little clubs with runes and cryptic names spraypainted on their walls, we made music for crowds of Dachau children with blue-black hair and flickering fishnetted hands. Sometimes a long wing of depression, a chill of horror touched Gene's days and midnights, brought on by acid or mushrooms or the skewed whorls of his brain. He raged through the church, and only our love for him kept us from hating him. He clung to the door of my room and accused me of having a thing with Sammy; he said he could taste

my spit in Sammy's mouth. I looked at dark-eyed Sammy standing in the hall behind Gene, and Sammy shook his head.

Gene lay on the slatted wooden floor and spoke of pathological self-destruction. He said he might never eat again: he could die among his bones, stop his heart by not feeding it, ignoring its pleas for bread. He could steal Sammy's razor blades and peel his skin away in thin slices. "I could make *you* kill me," he told Sammy, and Sammy gathered Gene into his arms and bowed his face over Gene's and rocked Gene's bony uncomfortable body, crooning a wordless plea for Gene to live, lulling them both into a rhythm of uneasy sleep.

One night Gene raved and sobbed until three. We could hear the rawness of his throat, as if his very voice were speckled with blood. Finally the church was silent. Saint and I, too unnerved to sleep, crept into Gene and Sammy's room. Sammy made room for us on the mattress and held us throughout the rest of the night, whispering meaningless words to drown out Gene's ragged breathing.

We played more gigs. Sometimes Gene laughed and was human. Past midnight we leaned out the upstairs windows of our church and stared out over the cupolas and pinnacled monstrosities of our city. The roots of madness twisted more deeply into Gene. He told Sammy he didn't want to write lyrics together any more; only Gene could make them dark enough, love their darkness, give the skeletal words the meaning they wanted. Gene drank two bottles of bourbon and left a red hand-shaped mark on Sammy's ivory cheek because Sammy had said he loved the sun. When Sammy shut himself in another room, Gene bloodied his fingers trying to get to him through the unlocked door.

One night Gene took a piece of rope and climbed alone to the bell tower of the church. There was no bell there, but the spiders had filled the empty tower with a bell of webs. The spiders watched Gene strangle, listened to his vox humana squeeze away.

Saint changed his name back to John and went to work for his father's pharmacy in Atlanta. Sammy cut down the rope in the bell tower and staggered under the meager weight of Gene. After the body was gone he lay on the mattress for days, fingering the rope, pulling it apart and braiding its fibers, destroying it and weaving it again. His eyes were black-green like rotting leaves. He did not speak, but I thought I could feel his scream, silent and spiraling and endless, echoing through the rooms.

One morning he was gone. Every tube of paint he owned had been emptied and smeared in great arcs across the floor and up over the walls, smothering the skeletal cats, clouding the eclipses. Sammy's rainbow footprints led through the mess, down the stairs. As I was leaving the church, I saw his guitar broken-necked in a corner. I got into my car and drove six thousand miles, drove two years trying to forget Gene's dark swollen face and Sammy's guitar choked into silence.

Georgia. I only knew I was home because a sign had welcomed me some miles back. The wood-and-glass renaissance town I had left bore no resemblance to the landscape of abandoned gas stations, grimy hamburger stands, junkyards watched over by seamed old men in tarpaper-and-tin shacks that peppered my route now. A town sprouted at the side of the highway—diner, graveyard, Baptist church—and withered again. A faded banner strung between two telephone poles flapped against the aluminum sky:

McGRUDER & LARKS
CARNIVAL SHOW
ROCKVILLE FAIRGROUND JAN 20-22.

A few jacked-up cars and rickety pickups were parked in the fairground lot. I pulled in, hoping for a an ice cream cone as sweet and cold as they used to be, a slice of greasy, chewy pizza, a ride on the merry-go-round maybe. A small adventure, a way of botting out the silences that Georgia had brought back.

The pizza was thin and cardboard-dry. The ice cream melted in a gummy river over my fingers, and they had no merry-go-round. I was making my way through the oily mud and evil-smelling wastecans toward the exit when a hand brushed my shoulder and a Georgia voice said, “You haven’t seen *everythin’* yet.”

I met his eyes. An aging child beginning to fatten, but he might have been handsome, even beautiful, once; his lips, bowed like a baby’s, might have kissed; his pale blue eyes might have dreamed. Now his fair hair straggled like dry cornsilk around his ears. A tiny gold hoop sparkled in one lobe. On his blue shirt, in fraying orange letters, was stitched the name Ben. He smiled, and though he lacked a front tooth, his smile was amazingly sweet. “It’s almost closin’ time,” he said. “I’ll let you in here for free.”

Canvas flapped behind him. Lurid painted shapes billowed and writhed. I made out the ornate red-and-gold lettering:

2-HEADED GOAT. SPIDER PIG WITH 8 LEGS. DEVIL TWINS FROM WALES. The freak tent. I wanted to turn away, to get back to my car and drive six thousand more miles, two more years. But I could not spoil Ben’s small kindness. “Thanks,” I said, and the carnival must have grown more deserted than I’d realized, for my voice echoed among the tents and stalls.

“Sure,” he said, and parted the canvas doorway.

The inside of the tent smelled of ancient dust and animal dung and acrid, deathly formaldehyde. The two-headed goat was alive, but its flanks trembled from the cold and the sawdust beneath its heads was spattered with greenish foam. The spider pig and other arcane fetuses floated in dim jars, curled, uncaring. The devil twins, flat and arid under glass, seemed to have flesh of hard earth, hair of dry grass.

Ben touched my shoulder again. “There’s one more. Out back. He usually costs extra, but seein’ as I let you in free anyhow—You’re not from round Rockville, are you?” Something trapped and screaming surfaced briefly in his eyes. I knew I did not want to see

whatever solitary freak he kept out back, in the cold and the wind, for spectators curious or morbid enough to pay an extra fifty cents.

“No,” I told him. “I’m not from around Rockville.”

He nodded, quiet, resigned. His eyes were once again as pale and placid as blue milk. “Come on then,” he said. “He’s waitin’.”

The out-back smell was heavy, sweet, and cloyingly rotten. Dung and garbage crept in great soft piles up the back of the tent. A few feet away, in a cage of iron and heavy chicken-wire with a concrete base, a thin thing shifted and crouched. Long pale fingers clawed at the gap at the top of the bars.

“It’s a geek,” said Ben softly, almost respectfully. He had a long stick in his hand and was thrusting it into the cage, poking the geek, making him twitch and snap at the stick with his teeth. “Come on, you, move. Get off your haunches ... Don’t you know what a geek is, mister? Used to be all of ’em was wild niggers from Borneo. This one, Mr. McGruder got him from an asylum north of here ... Let go that stick, you! You hungry, geek? Gonna show the man your trick? ... watch this, mister. Get in close. Not too close, he’ll try to grab you.” Ben stooped to a smaller cage and pulled out a twisted shape with flailing scaly tail and short scrabbling legs. With a little movement of his lips that might have been disgust or pity, he threw the rat into the geek’s cage.

I stooped to the gap and saw the rat racing across the cage floor in the instant before the geek’s hand flashed down to claim it. The concrete floor was covered with tracings and designs in flaking maroon. I watched the geek and knew the lines of his thin folded body. He began to salivate, and inside that wet mouth, that smear of red on white chalk skin, I saw the teeth that had once bitten Gene’s bird-boned throat—once longer ago than I knew, once when four boys lived in a church full of dust and sunlight. I saw the teeth that had tried to eat Gene’s pain away crunch through the rat’s bones. Long viscous strings of blood swirled with darker, stranger fluids dripped to the cage floor, forming puddles that covered the tracings there. I knew that later, before this fresh blood dried, the geek’s

fingers would find it and use it to create new tracings, new legends to decorate his cage.

I laced my fingers into the bars. Blood beaded his long dull dark hair, ran bright as watercolor paint down his thin neck and his chest like a box of bones stretched over with dry translucent skin. Blood was on his eyelashes, on his eyelids like makeup. He had painted his lids black, purple, gold before, to touch our gigs with glamour; now they were forever gory crimson, and the intelligence—the brilliance that had taught me to play bass guitar, had brought me through a bad acid trip with tales of heavenly rainbow fire and Chinese fish, had laid his psyche wide open with blood and paint on the walls of our haven—the intelligence still glittered in his eyes, green, mad, but there. Still there. The tracings on the floor of the cage were no accident: there were eyes, hanged men, cats and eclipses in blood. There was Saint's clever face, my face looking tender, Gene's face handsome and vampiric and Gene's face swollen, dead-eyed. And there in a corner was Sammy's own face, a cruel self-portrait, hollow-cheeked, mouth obscured by clots of gore.

I put my hand though the gap in the bars, but as Sammy reached up to take it, I drew back. His hand was slimy with blood and shreds of flesh. Ages of gore had dried under his fingernails. I could never touch him again. His eyes found mine and held them.

"Take me with you," he whispered through the bars, just before he bit the rat's head off.

I cranked my car radio up so loud that I could hear no distinct notes, no separate voices, only good mindless noise. I locked the doors and turned the heater on full blast against the winter night, against the vision of stars seen glittering coldly through cage bars. And the ribbon of highway rolled away from Rockville, and in its dwindling brightness I saw all the miles and all the years of the rest of my life.

His Mouth Will Taste of Wormwood

“To the treasures and the pleasures of the grave,” said my friend Louis, and raised his goblet of absinthe to me in drunken benediction.

“To the funeral lilies,” I replied, “and to the calm pale bones.” I drank deeply from my own glass. The absinthe cauterized my throat with its flavor, part pepper, part licorice, part rot. It had been one of our greatest finds: more than fifty bottles of the now-outlawed liqueur, sealed up in a New Orleans family tomb. Transporting them was a nuisance, but once we had learned to enjoy the taste of wormwood, our continued drunkenness was ensured for a long, long time. We had taken the skull of the crypt’s patriarch, too, and it now resided in a velvet-lined enclave in our museum.

Louis and I, you see, were dreamers of a dark and restless sort. We met in our second year of college and quickly found that we shared one vital trait: both of us were dissatisfied with everything. We drank straight whiskey and declared it too weak. We took strange drugs, but the visions they brought us were of emptiness, mindlessness, slow decay. The books we read were dull; the artists who sold their colorful drawings on the street were mere hacks in our eyes; the music we heard was never loud enough, never harsh enough to stir us. We were truly jaded, we told one another. For all the impression the world made upon us, our eyes might have been dead black holes in our heads.

For a time we thought our salvation lay in the sorcery wrought by music. We studied recordings of weird nameless dissonances, attended performances of obscure bands at ill-lit filthy clubs. But music did not save us. For a time we distracted ourselves with carnality. We explored the damp alien territory between the legs of

any girl who would have us, sometimes separately, sometimes both of us in bed together with one girl or more. We bound their wrists and ankles with black lace, we lubricated and penetrated their every orifice, we shamed them with their own pleasures. I recall a mauve-haired beauty, Felicia, who was brought to wild sobbing orgasm by the rough tongue of a stray dog we trapped. We watched her from across the room, drug-dazed and unstirred.

When we had exhausted the possibilities of women we sought those of our own sex, craving the androgynous curve of a boy's cheekbone, the molten flood of ejaculation invading our mouths. Eventually we turned to one another, seeking the thresholds of pain and ecstasy no one else had been able to help us attain. Louis asked me to grow my nails long and file them into needle-sharp points. When I raked them down his back, tiny beads of blood welled up in the angry tracks they left. He loved to lie still, pretending to submit to me, as I licked the salty blood away. Afterward he would push me down and attack me with his mouth, his tongue seeming to sear a trail of liquid fire into my skin.

But sex did not save us either. We shut ourselves in our room and saw no one for days on end. At last we withdrew to the seclusion of Louis's ancestral home near Baton Rouge. Both his parents were dead—a suicide pact, Louis hinted, or perhaps a suicide and a murder. Louis, the only child, retained the family home and fortune. Built on the edge of a vast swamp, the plantation house loomed sepulchrally out of the gloom that surrounded it always, even in the middle of a summer afternoon. Oaks of primordial hugeness grew in a canopy over the house, their branches like black arms fraught with Spanish moss. The moss was everywhere, reminding me of brittle gray hair, stirring wraithlike in the dank breeze from the swamp. I had the impression that, left too long unchecked, the moss might begin to grow from the ornate window-frames and fluted columns of the house itself.

The place was deserted save for us. The air was heady with the luminous scent of magnolias and the feter of swamp gas. At night we sat on the veranda and sipped bottles of wine from the family

cellar, gazing through an increasingly alcoholic mist at the will-o'-the-wisps that beckoned far off in the swamp. Obsessively we talked of new thrills and how we might get them. Louis's wit sparkled liveliest when he was bored, and on the night he first mentioned grave robbing, I laughed. I could not imagine that he was serious.

"What would we do with a bunch of dried-up old remains? Grind them to make a voodoo potion? I preferred your idea of increasing our tolerance to various poisons."

Louis's sharp face snapped toward me. His eyes were painfully sensitive to light, so that even in this gloaming he wore tinted glasses and it was impossible to see his expression. He kept his fair hair clipped very short, so that it stood up in crazy tufts when he raked a nervous hand through it. "No, Howard. Think of it: our own collection of death. A catalogue of pain, of human frailty—all for us. Set against a backdrop of tranquil loveliness. Think what it would be to walk through such a place, meditating, reflecting upon your own ephemeral essence. Think of making love in a charnel-house! We have only to assemble the parts—they will create a whole into which we may fall."

(Louis enjoyed speaking in cryptic puns; anagrams and palindromes, too, and any sort of puzzle appealed to him. I wonder whether that was not the root of his determination to look into the fathomless eye of death and master it. Perhaps he saw the mortality of the flesh as a gigantic jigsaw or crossword which, if he fitted all the parts into place, he might solve and thus defeat. Louis would have loved to live forever, though he would never have known what to do with all his time.)

He soon produced his hashish pipe to sweeten the taste of the wine, and we spoke no more of grave robbing that night. But the thought preyed upon me in the languorous weeks to come. The smell of a freshly opened grave, I thought, must in its way be as intoxicating as the perfume of the swamp or a girl's most intimate sweat. Could we truly assemble a collection of the grave's treasures that would be lovely to look upon, that would soothe our fevered souls?

The caresses of Louis's tongue grew languid. Sometimes, instead of nestling with me between the black satin sheets of our bed, he would sleep on a torn blanket in one of the underground rooms. These had originally been built for indeterminate but always intriguing purposes—abolitionist meetings had taken place there, Louis told me, and a weekend of free love, and an earnest but wildly incompetent Black Mass replete with a vestal virgin and phallic candles.

These rooms were where our museum would be set up. At last I came to agree with Louis that only the plundering of graves might cure us of the most stifling ennui we had yet suffered. I could not bear to watch his tormented sleep, the pallor of his hollow cheeks, the delicate bruise-like darkening of the skin beneath his flickering eyes. Besides, the notion of grave robbing had begun to entice me. In ultimate corruption, might we not find the path to ultimate salvation?

Our first grisly prize was the head of Louis's mother, rotten as a pumpkin forgotten on the vine, half-shattered by two bullets from an antique Civil War revolver. We took it from the family crypt by the light of a full moon. The will-o'-the-wisps glowed weakly, like dying beacons on some unattainable shore, as we crept back to the manse. I dragged pick and shovel behind me; Louis carried the putrescent trophy tucked beneath his arm. After we had descended into the museum, I lit three candles scented with the russet spices of autumn (the season when Louis's parents had died) while Louis placed the head in the alcove we had prepared for it. I thought I detected a certain tenderness in his manner. "May she give us the family blessing," he murmured, absently wiping on the lapel of his jacket a few shreds of pulpy flesh that had adhered to his fingers.

We spent a happy time refurbishing the museum, polishing the inlaid precious metals of the wall fixtures, brushing away the dust that frosted the velvet designs of the wallpaper, alternately burning incense and charring bits of cloth we had saturated with our blood, in order to give the rooms the odor we desired—a charnel perfume strong enough to drive us to frenzy. We travelled far in our

collections, but always we returned home with crates full of things no man had ever been meant to possess. We heard of a girl with violet eyes who had died in some distant town; not seven days later we had those eyes in an ornate cut-glass jar, pickled in formaldehyde. We scraped bone dust and nitre from the bottoms of ancient coffins; we stole the barely withered heads and hands of children fresh in their graves, with their soft little fingers and their lips like flower petals. We had baubles and precious heirlooms, vermiculated prayerbooks and shrouds encrusted with mold. I had not taken seriously Louis's talk of making love in a charnel-house—but neither had I reckoned on the pleasure he could inflict with a femur dipped in rose-scented oil.

Upon the night I speak of—the night we drank our toast to the grave and its riches—we had just acquired our finest prize yet. Later in the evening we planned a celebratory debauch at a nightclub in the city. We had returned from our most recent travels not with the usual assortment of sacks and crates, but with only one small box carefully wrapped and tucked into Louis's breast pocket. The box contained an object whose existence we had only speculated upon previously. From certain half-articulate mutterings of an old blind man plied with cheap liquor in a French Quarter bar, we traced rumors of a certain fetish or charm to a Negro graveyard in the southern bayou country. The fetish was said to be a thing of eerie beauty, capable of luring any lover to one's bed, hexing any enemy to a sick and painful death, and (this, I think, was what intrigued Louis the most) turning back tenfold on anyone who used it with less than the touch of a master.

A heavy mist hung low over the graveyard when we arrived there, lapping at our ankles, pooling around the markers of wood and stone, abruptly melting away in patches to reveal a gnarled root or a patch of blackened grass, then closing back in. By the light of a waning moon we made our way along a path overgrown with rioting weeds. The graves were decorated with elaborate mosaics of broken glass, coins, bottlecaps, oyster shells lacquered silver and gold. Some mounds were outlined by empty bottles shoved neck-

downward into the earth. I saw a lone plaster saint whose features had been worn away by years of wind and rain. I kicked half-buried rusty cans that had once held flowers; now they held only bare brittle stems and pestilent rainwater, or nothing at all. Only the scent of wild spider lilies pervaded the night.

The earth in one corner of the graveyard seemed blacker than the rest. The grave we sought was marked only by a crude cross of charred and twisted wood. We were skilled at the art of violating the dead; soon we had the coffin uncovered. The boards were warped by years of burial in wet, foul earth. Louis pried up the lid with his spade and, by the moon's meager and watery light, we gazed upon what lay within.

Of the inhabitant we knew almost nothing. Some said a hideously disfigured old conjure woman lay buried here. Some said she was a young girl with a face as lovely and cold as moonlight on water, and a soul crueler than Fate itself. Some claimed the body was not a woman's at all, but that of a white voodoo priest who had ruled the bayou. He had features of a cool, unearthly beauty, they said, and a stock of fetishes and potions which he would hand out with the kindest blessing ... or the direst curse. This was the story Louis and I liked best; the sorcerer's capriciousness appealed to us, and the fact that he was beautiful.

No trace of beauty remained to the thing in the coffin—at least not the sort of beauty that a healthy eye might cherish. Louis and I loved the translucent parchment skin stretched tight over long bones that seemed to have been carved from ivory. The delicate brittle hands folded across the sunken chest, the soft black caverns of the eyes, the colorless strands of hair that still clung to the fine white dome of the skull—to us these things were the poetry of death.

Louis played his flashlight over the withered cords of the neck. There, on a silver chain gone black with age, was the object we had come seeking. No crude wax doll or bit of dried root was this. Louis and I gazed at each other, moved by the beauty of the thing; then, as if in a dream, he reached to grasp it. This was our rightful night's prize, our plunder from a sorcerer's grave.

“How does it look?” Louis asked as we were dressing.

I never had to think about my clothes. On an evening such as this, when we were dressing to go out, I would choose the same garments I might wear for a night’s digging in the graveyard—black, unornamented black, with only the whiteness of my face and hands showing against the backdrop of night. On a particularly festive occasion, such as this, I might smudge a bit of kohl round my eyes. The absence of color made me nearly invisible: if I walked with my shoulders hunched and my chin tucked down, no one except Louis would see me.

“Don’t slouch so, Howard,” said Louis irritably as I ducked past the mirror. “Turn around and look at me. Aren’t I fine in my sorcerer’s jewelry?”

Even when Louis wore black, he did it to be noticed. Tonight he was resplendent in narrowlegged trousers of purple paisley silk and a silvery jacket that seemed to turn all light iridescent. He had taken our prize out of its box and fastened it around his throat. As I came closer to look at it, I caught Louis’s scent: rich and rather meaty, like blood kept too long in a stoppered bottle.

Against the sculpted hollow of Louis’s throat, the thing on its chain seemed more strangely beautiful than ever. Have I neglected to describe the magical object, the voodoo fetish from the churned earth of the grave? I will never forget it. A polished sliver of bone (or a tooth, but what fang could have been so long, so sleekly honed, and still have somehow retained the look of a *human tooth*?) bound by a strip of copper. Set into the metal, a single ruby sparkled like a drop of gore against the verdigris. Etched in exquisite miniature upon the sliver of bone, and darkened by the rubbing in of some black-red substance, was an elaborate veve—one of the symbols used by voodooists to invoke their pantheon of terrible gods. Whoever was buried in that lonely bayou grave, he had been no mere dabbler in swamp magic. Every cross and swirl of the veve was reproduced to perfection. I thought the thing still retained a

trace of the grave's scent—a dark odor like potatoes long spoiled. Each grave has its own peculiar scent, just as each living body does.

“Are you certain you should wear it?” I asked.

“It will go into the museum tomorrow,” he said, “with a scarlet candle burning eternally before it. Tonight its powers are mine.”

The nightclub was in a part of the city that looked as if it had been gutted from the inside out by a righteous tongue of fire. The street was lit only by occasional scribbles of neon high overhead, advertisements for cheap hotels and all-night bars. Dark eyes stared at us from the crevices and pathways between buildings, disappearing only when Louis's hand crept toward the inner pocket of his jacket. He carried a small stiletto there, and knew how to use it for more than pleasure.

We slipped through a door at the end of an alley and descended the narrow staircase into the club. The lurid glow of a blue bulb flooded the stairs, making Louis's face look sunken and dead behind his tinted glasses. Feedback blasted us as we came in, and above it, a screaming battle of guitars. The inside of the club was a patchwork of flickering light and darkness. Graffiti covered the walls and the ceiling like a tangle of barbed wire come alive. I saw bands' insignia and jeering death's-heads, crucifixes bejewelled with broken glass and black obscenities writhing in the stroboscopic light.

Louis brought me a drink from the bar. I sipped it slowly, still drunk on absinthe. Since the music was too loud for conversation, I studied the club-goers around us. A quiet bunch, they were, staring fixedly at the stage as if they had been drugged (and no doubt many of them had—I remembered visiting a club one night on a dose of hallucinogenic mushrooms, watching in fascination as the guitar strings seemed to drip soft viscera onto the stage). Younger than Louis and myself, most of them were, and queerly beautiful in their thrift shop rags, their leather and fishnet and cheap costume jewelry, their pale faces and painted hair. Perhaps we would take

one of them home with us tonight. We had done so before. “The delicious guttersnipes,” Louis called them. A particularly beautiful face, starkly boned and androgynous, flickered at the edge of my vision. When I looked, it was gone.

I went into the restroom. A pair of boys stood at a single urinal, talking animatedly. I stood at the sink rinsing my hands, watching the boys in the mirror and trying to overhear their conversation. A hairline fracture in the glass seemed to pull the taller boy’s eyes askew. “Casper and Alyssa found her tonight,” he said. “In some old warehouse by the river. I heard her skin was *gray*, man. And sort of withered, like something had sucked out most of the meat.”

“Far out,” said the other boy. His black-rimmed lips barely moved.

“She was only fifteen, you know?” said the tall boy as he zipped his ragged trousers.

“She was a cunt anyway.”

They turned away from the urinal and started talking about the band—Ritual Sacrifice, I gathered, whose name was scrawled on the walls of the club. As they went out, the boys glanced at the mirror and the tall one’s eyes met mine for an instant. Nose like a haughty Indian chief’s, eyelids smudged with black and silver. Louis would approve, I thought—but the night was young, and there were many drinks left to be had.

When the band took a break we visited the bar again. Louis edged in beside a thin dark-haired boy who was barechested except for a piece of torn lace tied about his throat. When he turned, I knew his was the androgynous and striking face I had glimpsed before. His beauty was almost feral, but overlaid with a cool elegance like a veneer of sanity hiding madness. His ivory skin stretched over cheekbones like razors; his eyes were hectic pools of darkness.

“I like your amulet,” he said to Louis. “It’s very unusual.”

“I have another one like it at home,” Louis told him.

“Really? I’d like to see them both together.” The boy paused to let Louis order our vodka gimlets, then said, “I thought there was only one.”

Louis’s back straightened like a string of beads being pulled taut. Behind his glasses, I knew, his pupils would have shrunk to pinpoints: the light pained him more when he was nervous. But no tremor in his voice betrayed him when he said, “What do you know about it?”

The boy shrugged. On his bony shoulders, the movement was insouciant and drop-dead graceful. “It’s voodoo,” he said. “I know what voodoo is. Do you?”

The implication stung, but Louis only bared his teeth the slightest bit; it might have been a smile. “I am *conversant* in all types of magic,” he said, “at least.”

The boy moved closer to Louis, so that their hips were almost touching, and lifted the amulet between thumb and forefinger. I thought I saw one long nail brush Louis’s throat, but I could not be sure. “I could tell you the meaning of this veve,” he said, “if you were certain you wished to know.”

“It symbolizes power,” Louis said. “All the power of my soul.” His voice was cold, but I saw his tongue dart out to moisten his lips. He was beginning to dislike this boy, and also to desire him.

“No,” said the boy so softly that I barely caught his words. He sounded almost sad. “This cross in the center is inverted, you see, and the line encircling it represents a serpent. A thing like this can trap your soul. Instead of being rewarded with eternal life ... you might be doomed to it.”

“Doomed to eternal life?” Louis permitted himself a small cold smile. “Whatever do you mean?”

“The band is starting again. Find me after the show and I’ll tell you. We can have a drink ... and you can tell me all you know about voodoo.” The boy threw back his head and laughed. Only then did I notice that one of his upper canine teeth was missing.

The next part of the evening remains a blur of moonlight and neon, ice cubes and blue swirling smoke and sweet drunkenness. The boy drank glass after glass of absinthe with us, seeming to relish the bitter taste. None of our other guests had liked the liqueur. “Where did you get it?” he asked. Louis was silent for a long moment before he said, “It was sent over from France.” Except for its single black gap, the boy’s smile would have been as perfect as the sharp-edged crescent moon.

“Another drink?” said Louis, refilling both our glasses.

When I next came to clarity, I was in the boy’s arms. I could not make out the words he was whispering; they might have been an incantation, if magic may be sung to pleasure’s music. A pair of hands cupped my face, guiding my lips over the boy’s pale parchment skin. They might have been Louis’s hands. I knew nothing except this boy, the fragile movement of the bones beneath the skin, the taste of his spit bitter with wormwood.

I do not remember when he finally turned away from me and began lavishing his love upon Louis. I wish I could have watched, could have seen the lust bleeding into Louis’s eyes, the pleasure wracking his body. For, as it turned out, the boy loved Louis so much more thoroughly than ever he loved me.

When I awoke, the bass thump of my pulse echoing through my skull blotted out all other sensations. Gradually, though, I became aware of tangled silk sheets, of hot sunlight on my face. Not until I came fully awake did I see the thing I had cradled like a lover all through the night.

For an instant two realities shifted in uneasy juxtaposition and almost merged. I was in Louis’s bed; I recognized the feel of the sheets, their odor of silk and sweat. But this thing I held—this was surely one of the fragile mummies we had dragged out of their graves, the things we dissected for our museum. It took me only a moment, though, to recognize the familiar ruined features—the sharp chin, the high elegant brow. Something had desiccated Louis, had drained him of every drop of his moisture, his vitality. His skin

crackled and flaked away beneath my fingers. His hair stuck to my lips, dry and colorless. The amulet, which had still been around his throat in bed last night, was gone.

The boy had left no trace—or so I thought until I saw a nearly transparent thing at the foot of the bed. It was like a quantity of spiderweb, or a damp and insubstantial veil. I picked it up and shook it out, but could not see its features until I held it up to the window. The thing was vaguely humanshaped, with empty limbs trailing off into nearly invisible tatters. As the thing wafted and billowed, I saw part of a face in it—the sharp curve left by a cheekbone, the hole where an eye had been—as if a face were imprinted upon gauze.

I carried Louis's brittle shell of a corpse down into the museum. Laying him before his mother's niche, I left a stick of incense burning in his folded hands and a pillow of black silk cradling the papery dry bulb of his skull. He would have wished it thus.

The boy has not come to me again, though I leave the window open every night. I have been back to the club, where I stand sipping vodka and watching the crowd. I have seen many beauties, many strange wasted faces, but not the one I seek. I think I know where I will find him. Perhaps he still desires me—I must know.

I will go again to the lonely graveyard in the bayou. Once more—alone, this time—I will find the unmarked grave and plant my spade in its black earth. When I open the coffin—I know it, I am sure of it!—I will find not the mouldering thing we beheld before, but the calm beauty of replenished youth. The youth he drank from Louis. His face will be a scrimshaw mask of tranquility. The amulet—I know it; I am sure of it—will be around his neck.

Dying: the final shock of pain or nothingness that is the price we pay for everything. Could it not be the sweetest thrill, the only salvation we can attain ... the only true moment of self-knowledge? The dark pools of his eyes will open, still and deep enough to drown in. He will hold out his arms to me, inviting me to lie down with him in his rich wormy bed.

With the first kiss his mouth will taste of wormwood. After that it will taste only of me—of my blood, my life, siphoning out of my body and into his. I will feel the sensations Louis felt: the shrivelling of my tissues, the drying-up of all my vital juices. I care not. The treasures and the pleasures of the grave? They are his hands, his lips, his tongue.

1989

Optional Music for Voice and Piano

1960

When the hand snaked out and dragged him into the alley, the boy's only emotion was a sick sense of I-told-you-so. He'd known he couldn't make it home safely.

There had been a new book about magic at the library. Reading it, he'd lost track of time, not knowing how late it was until Mrs. Cooper reminded him that she had to close up in fifteen minutes. His parents would be furious. He'd rushed out of the reading room and down the stone steps that led to the sidewalk, having taken only the time to close the book reverently and slide it back into its own space on the shelf. Even in a hurry, he had loved the newness of the red leather against the older, more faded cloth covers.

He had never been out by himself so late at night.

Somehow the night allowed familiar things to change their forms. Bats swooped around streetlights; they seemed too low, almost brushing the top of his head with their skittery wings. Two bristling, pointy-eared things darted across his path, and he jumped back and made an involuntary little sound in his throat. That was when the hand closed around his neck.

It dragged him into the alley and held him tightly against itself. His face was buried in the folds of a dress or cloak. A pungent, musty smell squirmed up his nostrils. He was unable to cough the dust away. He began to choke. Then the hand was at his mouth. The fingers, hard, dry, and impossibly sharp, scrabbled at his mouth. It was trying to force his lips apart.

He twisted his face away, clamping his lips tighter than he had thought possible. The fingers dug into his face, wrenching his head

back into the folds of the cloak. Something tiny and delicate snapped in his neck. A soft cry escaped him—the pain was sickening.

There were two hands then; one pinched his nose, drawing blood. Finally, unable to hold his breath any longer, he opened his mouth and gulped great gasps of mercifully cool air. The other hand slapped down over his mouth. Something soft and slimy slid past his lips and spread over his tongue. He felt as if a salted slug had dissolved in his mouth. The stuff tasted the way the cloak had smelled, tangy and bitter.

He wanted to spit, but the hand was still clamped painfully across his face. The glob warmed his throat as it slid down. That part almost felt good. The warmth began to spread through him. He went wonderfully limp. His toes and fingers tingled. The hands let him go and he slithered to the ground.

The cool bricks felt good against his cheek. His neck was twisted at an awkward angle, but he no longer noticed the pain. Between the tops of the buildings that soared up on either side of him, he could see a sliver of darkness sprinkled with pinpoint stars. A night breeze brushed over his face and ruffled his hair as he stared up. The sky was incredibly beautiful. He wanted to sing to it.

1980

The piano keys were bone-smooth and cold under his fingers. He loved the starkness of them, black on white against the deeper black lacquer of the piano. The room was stark too, purposely so. The piano and its bench were the only objects in the room. The floor was of dark polished wood with a honey-golden undertone that made it seem to glow.

He sat with his back to the long window which nearly filled the rear wall of the room. His house sat on a cliff overlooking the sea. When he stood at the window, he could look down at waves crashing and disintegrating on jagged rocks. But he sat on the far

side of the room. If he had turned to face the window, he would have seen only a long expanse of gray-blue sky broken by the three heavy crossbars of the window.

It might have been an early morning sky or an early evening sky or a sky about to storm; he neither knew nor cared. He slept whenever he was tired and spent most of his waking hours at the piano. His face, bent over the keys, was serene and nearly expressionless. At thirty, he was almost as boyish as he had been at ten: his body was slim and compact, his unlined pale face overhung by a soft mop of dark hair, eyes like limpid black pools, a serious, sad mouth.

He let his hands wander across the piano keys. The notes rose, clustered, broke away from each other and drifted back down to melt into the golden floor. As they touched his ears, he smiled faintly. It had taken him so long to realize he could make this kind of music.

1960

His neck wasn't broken. Having it wrenched so sharply had pulled a muscle, and while he was in the hospital he had to lie flat on his back, as nearly motionless as possible, with a thick metal-and-foam collar holding his neck immobile. He learned the position of every crack and speck on the ceiling. At times the boredom was almost tangible.

He learned not to cry because the tears would trickle down the sides of his head and make the hair behind his ears unpleasantly damp; he couldn't lift his hands high enough to wipe the tears away.

After the first two days he discovered that singing relieved his boredom. Even better, it made him forget his pain and his experience in the alley.

One night a nurse heard him. He stopped when she came into the room, but she asked him to go on, and after a bit of coaxing he sang her a song. He had composed the words and the tune himself, while

lying in the hospital bed. He could see trees and a piece of sky through his window, and he longed to be outside. He had rhymed “trees” with “breeze.” It was the work of a ten-year-old, although the poetry showed promise.

What mattered, though, was his voice. His neck was strained and padded; by all rights his voice should have sounded stifled, weak. Instead, it was glorious. He sang high and hoarse and sweet, the voice of a child, but hidden in his song were hints of darkness, intimations of fear and pain.

As the nurse held his hand and listened to him, tears started in her eyes. She had remembered a night nearly forty years ago, when her parents had gone on a shopping trip to the city and forgotten to leave the front door unlocked for her. They were three miles away from their nearest neighbors, and she had huddled in a corner of the front porch, tiny and sick with terror, until the familiar car had finally turned into the driveway. Nothing in the boy’s pretty little song had suggested this, yet she recalled it so vividly that her stomach twisted with childish dread.

The memory hurt her, but the boy’s voice was so beautiful that she called the other nurses in to hear him sing. They held their breaths until he had finished. One of them, a girl barely twenty-one, ran out of the room sobbing. She explained later that she didn’t know what had come over her; she supposed she just felt sorry for the poor child, lying there so pale and thin.

The boy listened to the nurses whispering outside the door, and tears pooled in his eyes too. He blinked them away, remembering that he couldn’t cry. Instead he began to sing softly to himself.

1970

He stood with his forehead pressed against the cool glass of the small window that wouldn’t open. Behind him, in the dressing room of the club, the other members of the band were milling about; tuning guitars, running nervous fingers through their ratty hair,

getting ready to do a show. He could see faint reflections of their movements in the glass.

He looked past the phantom images at the sky. Evening was stealing over the city. The sky was a gradually intensifying blue, deeper than eggshell but not yet azure; swirled through the blue were pale pink clouds as fluffy and ethereal as cotton candy. He couldn't look away from it until PJ came over and clapped a hand onto his shoulder. "How are you doing, man? All set?"

He turned to face PJ. The drummer blinked, then grinned. "I love it," he said. "You look great."

He was dressed entirely in black: leotard, tights, a long scarf tied around his head. His face was painted white, and around his eyes and eyebrows he had smudged black kohl, making them look sunken and veiled. His face was framed by his dark hair, which fell nearly to his shoulders. He looked ghoulish; he looked beautiful.

"I love it," PJ said again.

"Thanks." He turned away from the window.

"It's pretty crowded out there. I looked." PJ grinned again, nervous. This was the band's first real performance, the first time they were to be paid for making music.

"Great," he said with an effort. He didn't want to talk; he could feel the anticipation building up inside him. Right now he didn't want to use his voice for anything but singing.

The dressing room door opened and a head popped in. "Guys? You about set?" The other three grimaced at each other. He closed his eyes, feeling a shiver begin in the pit of his stomach and go through him in two directions; it slid down his legs, making his knees lock; it tingled up through his chest into his throat, trying to push his voice out. He was ready.

At the first thrill of his voice, the crowd's conversations dwindled. By the time he had sung the opening lines of the first song, everyone in the club was staring at him, some pushing forward to get closer

to the stage, some breathing the smoke-swirled air a little more shallowly.

Their set was not long, but time stopped for him; the show might have gone on a moment or an eon. At the highest notes his voice hoarsened and seemed as if it must break; the sound brought tears to a few listeners' eyes.

By the last song, some of the crowd sang along with the chorus. Others sat absolutely still, eyes fixed on his face. Several were crying openly as they sang or listened.

In the back of the club, a heavy man in a business suit shuddered and put his hand over his eyes. He scouted for a record label, and he had come to ferret out marketable talent, not to have his emotions ravaged by the music. But the singer's voice had brought to his mind a soft, sweet lullaby his mother had sung to him years ago. His mother had died swiftly and messily in a highway accident when he was fifteen. The memory was nearly unbearable.

The man shuddered again, then froze and pressed his hand to his chest. He felt his heart miss a beat. He started to get up with the vague idea of finding a phone, finding a doctor, asking someone, anyone for help. The pain slammed him back into his chair. He wanted to loosen his collar, but when he raised his arm, a bolt stabbed at his heart.

The last thing he saw was the singer staring confusedly toward the back of the club, then, as people realized what was happening and moved to help, bowing his head as if in shame.

1973

She was a pretty girl, though wan and fair-cheeked, with shiny black hair in two ponytails and a battered metal boom box in her arms. An earplug cord ran from the box up to her shoulder and disappeared beneath her right ponytail.

The girl stood on the roof of a gray stone office building and stared down at the cars roaring through the grubby streets, the

people milling eleven stories below. She imagined being in the middle of that crowd, smelling the people's bodies, their hot stale breath. She hoped she would land on one of them.

This wasn't the way it was supposed to be. In cartoons or on TV shows a crowd of people always gathered below, half of them trying to save the person, the other half yelling, "Jump!" No one had even noticed her on the edge of the roof. No one would see her go off.

A gust of wind startled her, and she stumbled for her balance. She wasn't even sure whether she had the nerve to jump yet; she certainly didn't want to be pushed off. She pressed a button on her cassette player. The tape began, hissing its silence into her ear; then the voice filled her head. Her band, her singer, her love—the only person she loved. None of her poems expressed the agony of her life as well as the darkness and pain in his voice. He had known the same pain, she thought—not worse pain, nothing could be worse than her pain, but he knew. He understood. The excruciating beauty of his singing told her so. Yes, he understood. If she died, she would die for him. She was glad she had written him that note.

The music controlled her entire body now. It would lift her off the edge of the roof. If she was meant to live, it would carry her away; she would fly. If not, she would fall.

Now his voice filled the world. "In the fire—in the center of the fire—I am pure," he wailed. His voice crested on the word "pure."

She leaped. His voice followed her down. The boom box shattered when she hit the sidewalk.

1974

"I don't want to," he said. It was a half-hearted protest.

"Yes you do. You say you don't, but I can hear what you really mean. You mean you want to," Killner told him. Killner was the band's manager. He hated Killner's voice. Unpleasantly dry and papery, it got into his ear and skittered around until he lost track of

his thoughts and ended up agreeing to whatever it was Killner wanted him to do.

Killner kept talking. He took the phone away from his ear and stared at it, half-smiling at the buzz of unintelligible words. Eventually he put the phone back to his ear.

“Besides, you’re not the only member of this band,” Killner was saying. “I already talked to PJ and Toby and Mack. They all want to do it. You’re crazy to pass this up. You haven’t done anything in six months—no recording, no gigs. Do you want everybody to forget about you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s great. You know this band is nothing without your voice. Do you want to let everybody down? Those fans? PJ and Toby and Mack?”

“Look,” he told Killner. “Singing is my life. I sing to myself every day; there’s no way I could stop. I love it more than anything else in the world. But I told you before, I don’t want to do any more records and I especially don’t want to do any more live shows. Something always happens. I don’t know why it is, but something always happens. Remember the guy who died at our first gig?”

“That guy had a history of heart trouble.”

“Right. What about the people who’ve died in car wrecks when they just happened to be heading home after one of our concerts? What about that girl who tried to stab her lover in the parking lot after a show? What about the guy who started screaming during the last concert? Guys came to get him, Killner. Guys in white coats.

“I thought that only happened in the funny papers. They took him to the hospital. I heard later that all he would say for three days was, ‘His eyes.’ His eyes. They thought he was talking about his eyes, Killner. That was the night I wore the black robes and the green Day-Glo paint around my eyes. My eyes looked like they were glowing. What about that?”

“It was your costume, not—”

“I’m not finished. What about that suicide note, Killner. What about the note? Remember the fifteen-year-old girl who sent me her suicide note and threw herself off a building? Remember ‘I love only you and I’m doing what your voice tells me to do?’ What about that, Killner?”

“Do you hold yourself accountable for all the crazy people in the world?”

“Only-when-they’re-crazy-because-of-my-voice.”

“Look ...” Killner’s voice turned oily, seductive. “This is an incredible opportunity. It’s amazing that they even want you to play there. Rock bands never play there.”

“We’re not a rock band.”

“What’s wrong with being a goddamn rock band? Never mind—don’t start. They know you’re an artist. You know what they want you to do? They want you to do the flying bit.”

He closed his eyes, remembering the glinting Peter Pan wire, the stomach-dropping sensation of soaring.

“Like in ’72. Remember how you loved that? The first time you did it, you told me it was the most glorious performance you’d ever given—soaring above the stage, singing your everloving heart out in midair. You want to miss that?”

He kept his eyes closed. He had always imagined that flying would be nearly as incredible as singing. Doing both at once had been almost too much to bear.

“So what do you say?”

“No,” he whispered. “I told you no and I still say no. I can’t hurt any more people.”

Killner gave up then and said goodbye in aggrieved tones. Ten minutes later the phone rang. That would be PJ. When Killner couldn’t convince him to do something, he always enlisted PJ to give it another try. PJ had a way of making things sound so simple and appealing that one felt like a fool for ever having refused them.

He wanted this so much; he wouldn't be able to say no again. He wasn't going to answer the phone.

It rang again.

If he picked it up, he was lost.

The phone screamed at him.

He had to answer it.

He mustn't.

He had to.

He snatched the receiver off its cradle. "All right," he yelled into the phone. "All right, all right, I'll do it, all right, only leave me alone."

"What?" said PJ's voice as he choked back a sob.

He was wearing his oldest costume black, pure black, with white face and dark, hollow eyes. It had always been his favorite, the simplest yet the most powerful, and the black flying harness blended well with it.

He thought about flying. It had been so long—

PJ's hand was on his shoulder. "I realize this is rough for you," PJ told him. "You know we really wanted to do this show. Thanks for agreeing to it." He nodded at PJ, didn't speak. The others were used to his pre-concert silence; it no longer fazed them. They thought he was saving his voice for the show. They didn't understand that when he was going to sing, speaking just wasn't worthwhile.

It hardly seemed to matter now.

He pushed aside the window curtain and looked out at the sky. No cotton candy clouds this time; tonight he saw only a small cold moon floating high in the sky, haloed and partially obscured by clouds.

One of the stage technicians came up behind him. "Listen, I wanted to remind you about the harness wires once more. Be careful. Make sure the wires are well away from your neck before

you give the signal that you're ready to go up, because I can't see what you're doing. That wire's sharp. If I pull you up while one of them's looped around your neck, it could cut your head half off. Just take your time and give me the signal when you're ready."

The tech patted him on the back, between the straps of his harness. He smiled madly and waved the guy away, wanting nothing more than to end the stream of chatter. He didn't need a briefing on those wires. He knew everything about them.

There were ten minutes to go, then five, then none. They were onstage before he really knew what was happening. PJ and Toby and Mack pranced a bit, happy to be performing again. He stood still at center stage, staring out at the crowd.

He could see faces in the first few rows; they were watching him, wanting him, wanting the deepest part of him. Who would he hurt tonight? Who would go home and put a gun to his forehead—who would hurt a person she loved—who would lose his mind?

No one.

No one at all, if he knew what he was doing.

He sang the first song. He threw himself into it so hard that by the end of the song he was on his knees, clutching the microphone with both hands, pushing every bit of air in his body into the notes. His glory had reached its crescendo. If anyone noticed the wetness on his cheeks, they thought it was sweat. He held the last note of the song for a full minute.

The crowd went wild.

It was time to fly.

He eased himself up, trembling, and went to the rear of the stage where the wires dangled. They glinted gold and silver and all the colors of the stage lights, thin as hairs but strong enough, together, to support a hundred and thirty-five pounds of him. He began attaching them to the hooks on his harness. When he came to the last wire, the one that supported the largest part of his weight, he glanced into the wings. The tech nodded, ready to pull him up.

He looped the wire around his neck and gave the signal.

1980

He got up and walked away from the piano to the window. Fine mist from the crashing of the waves on the rocks was hitting the glass—there would be a storm soon. He might sit by the long window and watch its glorious fury.

He returned to the piano and played a little more, a sprinkling, dancing tune that skipped across the polished floor. He rested his cheek on the top of the piano, loving its sleek coolness against his skin. His hand strayed to his throat and stroked the tight, shiny scar that stretched nearly from ear to ear. His fingers traced the jagged line of it. He remembered the relief he'd felt, waking after the hours of impossibly delicate surgery, when the doctor told him his vocal cords had been severed and he would never talk—let alone sing—again.

He sat at his piano for a while. Then, when the long, sweet sound of serenity had completely filled him, he went to the window to watch the storm.

1985

Xenophobia

I hated Robert. He thought he was a Punk Rocker. He wore one pink hightop sneaker and one yellow, and he never washed his hair, so it stood up in filthy little twists all over his head. When I took him down to Chinatown, I was hoping I could get him drunk and sell him to some unscrupulous Chinese chef for big money. It's said they use dead cats. Why not Robert Foo Yung?

He talked so much on the bus (about uninteresting things like the book of poisonous recipes he was writing) that we got off at the wrong stop and found ourselves in the porn district. The light of the setting sun was as red as desire. X's paraded across every marquee. The poster girls' nipples and lipstick had long since faded to a dusty orange. The signs and lampposts and even the square of sidewalk we stood on seemed to vibrate silently in the hellish glow, as if some enormous city-machine thrummed far below the pavement. "You've gotten us lost," said Robert, licking his lips nervously, and then we rounded a corner and saw the pinnacle of Chinatown's first gaudy pagoda rising above the city.

The streets of Chinatown thrilled me, but my excitement was spiked with a vein of clear unease. I sometimes wonder whether my large Caucasian presence was merely tolerated on the exotic streets, perhaps even found secretly amusing. At night the lights of Chinatown turn the sky bright purple, and the banners hung from balcony to scrolled balcony crack in the wind like shots, their messages unreadable (Good Health? Long Life? Get Fucked?). There seems always to be a smell of gunpowder and hot sesame oil in the air. The neon runs together in a blaze of colors, red and white and green and gold and azure, and if you should happen to arrive after dropping a nice hit or two of acid, all the spiky Chinese characters

will jump off the signs and race round and round at a giddy speed, laughing into your mystified, unslanted, unblack eyes.

We stopped in front of a restaurant and considered having Dim Sum, but the menu was written in Chinese, all up-and-down. “Fried lice,” Robert translated, putting his sticky fingers all over the window glass. “Monkey brains in syrup. Eyeball pie.” He giggled. I noticed a crust of old lipstick in the corners of his mouth. Why had I brought him? Could I drag him into the shadowy serene interior of some temple, leave him sacrificed before a smiling golden Buddha?

A river of people flowed around us as we stood waiting for something to happen on the corner of two inscrutably marked streets. Most of them wore neat black clothes and neat black slippers, and were a full head shorter than Robert or I. The darker of the two streets was lit mostly with blue neon—the blue light is a universal advertisement for Chinese food, and a native far from home knows that where he sees it he will find the rice lovingly steamed, the pork pickle well-braised—and the glossily bobbing heads flickered with highlights of unearthly blue. I felt immense, pale, bloated. Robert was worse. He shifted from foot to pink-shod foot, muttering under his breath, twirling a matted lock of hair round his finger. His eyes had taken on the color of the night sky over Chinatown. One look into them and I knew tonight would be a hideous adventure that might never end. He had that wild empty glare he got sometimes, like his soul had gone out to party and left him behind and he was determined to catch up with it. Once when he had gotten that glare in New Orleans, we woke up three days later in a motel room that reeked of ash and sour vomit, wearing nothing but dirty underwear and beaded Mardi Gras masks.

But right now he only wanted ice cream. We huddled in a sweet shop, eating vanilla because the other flavors—lychee, almond, green tea—sounded too Chinese. Even the vanilla had a peculiar aftertaste, faintly oily but too delicate to offend. Beside us was a display case full of strange dusty-looking pastries: thousand-year-old eggs in sugared nests, squid jellies piped full of cream. The shop was lit by a single weak lamp behind a paper shade. In its dimness I

made out only one other customer, a lone old man nursing a cup of tea.

Robert wanted to drink, but had spent our last money on the bus fare and the ice cream. We sat at the table trying to think of a way around our poverty, or straight through it if need be. “We could find some girls,” I said.

The very ends of his hair trembled. “Chinese girls? I heard that their, you know, their, you know ...” His voice was loud and babyish.

I lowered my own voice almost to a whisper, hoping he would copy me. “Cunts, Robert.”

“... That they open sideways instead of up-and-down.”

Most of Robert’s babble slipped past me, but not this. I stopped eating my ice cream and became lost in trying to visualize such an intriguing possibility. In my mind I could see the tantalizing orifice, but it remained maddeningly vertical; I could not make it turn sideways. Only when Robert poked me in the ribs did I notice the old Chinese man standing silently before our table.

He might have been three hundred years old. He might have been a Biblical king come out of the desert, with cold stars gleaming in his long black eyes. He might have been a bonsai tree, shrunken and gnarled, with skin the color of old wood. But he was well-dressed, I saw: a neat and sober black suit, a shirt so white it took on a faint silver glow in the dim light. A little beard grew under his chin like a goat’s, wagging when he spoke. “If I may disturb you?” He paused, then added, “Gentlemen?”

Robert was beyond speech; he just stared, his mouth open a little, a last trace of vanilla on his lips. The moment stretched out long, punctuated by the blinking of neon outside. On—and the inside of the shop was bathed in garish night rainbows. Off—and there was only the lamp behind its faded paper shade, and the soft web of shadows. At last my manners came back to me and I pointed at a chair. “Go ahead. Disturb us.”

He sat neatly, his hands folded before him. They were like old ginseng roots: long-fingered, tapering, dry. The beard wagged again. “You were saying you needed money for the night’s ... ah ... festivities.”

His perfect English suddenly annoyed me. I became tough, but suave; all I needed was a snapbrim hat and a pencil-thin moustache. “You want to give us some?”

His eyes seemed to burn a hole through my facade. “Not give ... not exactly. I am a businessman, you see, and I require a service. If I were to offer you five dollars each, might you be able to perform a service for me?”

“Five dollars!” Robert snorted. “We wouldn’t wash your chopsticks for five dollars.”

“I see,” said the old man. “And if I were to add that you might have unlimited use of a bottle of good cognac?”

Before Robert could say anything I leaned across the table and put my face right up next to the old man’s. “Just what business are you in, mister?”

The man paused. I saw neon flickering across his eyes. On—and they exploded with a thousand firework colors. Off—and they were flat black, the color of dynasties long fallen to dust, the color of Mystery incarnate.

“I am an undertaker,” he said.

It turned out that the man wanted Robert and me to keep vigil over the corpse of a middle-aged woman while he slipped out to drink with another undertaker. His apprentice was ill, he explained, and his parlor had already been broken into twice. Bandits came through the window and robbed the corpses of rings, watches, even—on one occasion—an artificial foot. I wondered who had wanted the foot, and why, and if the other undertaker was also abandoning his charges to go out drinking. At the back of my mind was still that disquieting image, the one I could not quite visualize.

Robert looked sidelong at me. It would be an easy ten dollars—if the old man’s story was true. Why would he trust us to watch over the corpse of a stranger, and a Chinese one at that? At worst the man might lead us to a secret slaughterhouse where we would be hung on hooks, bled dry by tubes of bamboo shoved beneath our skin, and sold as cheap sides of pork to the less reputable restaurants. At best, he might lure us to an opium palace where we would be used like other, choicer cuts of meat, kept blissfully stoned every hour. But if the old man was telling the truth, his cognac would give our evening a fast start. Robert stared at me: he would not refuse, so neither could I. “All right,” I said, and we followed the old man out of the sweet shop.

It was getting late now, and a party had begun in Chinatown. The street was a dazzle of lights, a feast of smells. Neon ran riot. Traffic signals stayed red or turned green, and cars inched along the narrow street flashing their headlights impatiently. Slabs of pork sizzled on a grill, oiling the air with the tender red scent of meat. I saw a row of ducks hanging in the window of a grocery, skinned, their eyes scooped out and their beaks tied shut with dirty bits of string. Below them was a porcelain bowl filled with what looked like thousands of tiny dried-up human hands.

The man led us down an alley, along a steep unlit back street where tough Chinese stood on the corner passing a pint of wine. We entered a high vaulted passage, then wound through a maze of corridors that opened onto a courtyard made of moonlight and stillness. Here flowed a small stream over rocks of luminescent alabaster. Here grew trees that seemed carved all in jade, each leaf, each twig. I looked up. The square of night sky above the courtyard was a deeper purple than we had seen earlier, a velvet hand cradling a cold slice of moon. We came upon an iron staircase that spiralled up into darkness. The old man beckoned to us, then began to climb.

We went down a long hallway lit by votive candles in wall-sconces. The tiny blue flames flickered sharply in one direction, then

in the other, though I felt no draft in the hall. We passed a line of tightly shut doors and were admitted into the last one.

“This is my parlor,” the old man told us.

The room was wrapped in shadow. The darkness didn’t recede much when the old man pulled a silk cord; the only light in the room came from a lamp with a shade of heavy red paper, as dim as the one in the sweet shop.

The object of our vigil lay on a long red table near the window. Through the thick draperies I saw the neon of Chinatown still blinking, playing over the shroud. On—and each fold of cloth was full of a different color light. Off—and it was only wrinkled linen again, bone-white and shadow-gray, wound tightly around each hill and lump of the woman’s body. I stared at the blinking rainbow shroud, transfixed. Then I glanced up and saw Robert staring just as fixedly at the large bottle of cognac the man had brought out from a hidden cupboard.

“Enjoy,” he said. “Gentlemen. And if the lady should become restless, you need only give her a sip of this.”

Not until he was five minutes gone did we realize that the undertaker had cracked a joke.

I kept vigil beside the shroud, swigging from the bottle of cognac whenever Robert offered it to me. I was already well along—a warm amber fire smoldering in my throat, a puddle of brains swimming pleasantly inside my skull. Robert sucked down twice as much cognac as I did. He roamed around the room looking at everything. He tried to peek under the shroud and see the woman’s face, but the cloth was tucked securely beneath the heavy head. The shroud molded the shape of the body precisely. After my fifth swig of cognac, an uneasy impression began to nag at me: the idea that there might be no corpse at all under that shroud, that the cloth might be like a decayed mummy’s wrappings, cradling only the memory of a body. Robert had once taken me to visit his parents’ house. He caught a big spider and put it in his mother’s microwave

oven on a setting of 1 MIN—HIGH. When we took the spider out and broke it open, whatever innards it might have had were cooked away—not even a gummy residue of viscera remained. The body was only a dry chitinous husk. This was how I pictured the shroud—an empty shell wrapped around eternity.

Robert found a cache of morticians' makeup in a drawer. The rouge came in a little gold compact with a vanity mirror inside, which I found obscenely funny. Robert began to smear the makeup onto his face: yellowish pancake base heavy enough to cover knife wounds or the purple discoloration of asphyxia, white eyeshadow that made his eyes seem to bulge out of their sockets, shocking pink lipstick. Then he reached into the makeup case again and pulled out a more interesting object: a porcelain pipe with a long slender stem of silver. It was empty, but the bowl was blackened with a sticky sweet-smelling residue.

“An opium pipe,” I said.

“I knew what it was.” Robert dipped a finger in the gummy black residue and sucked at it. “But it’s empty. Wait, what’s this?” From the depths of the makeup case he pulled out a crumpled plastic bag.

“Something in here—” He shook out several shreds of what looked like leathery dried skin. When he stared at me in alarm, I said, “It must be some kind of fungus.” “Mushrooms?” Robert’s eyes gleamed; he might have been a child gazing upon Willy Wonka’s wonderland of magic candy.

“Could be,” I said. “He was a pretty trippy old dude. Maybe we found his stash.”

Without further debate Robert crammed the leathery fragments into his mouth and chewed noisily, then smiled at me. I saw dark shreds caught in his teeth. “You’ll have some too, *won’t* you?”

At the implicit dare I stuck out my hand. Robert shook a generous amount of the fungi into my cupped palm, and I munched them thoughtfully. The taste was a little like psilocybin mushrooms, that same dry dead redolence that coats the tongue, but the texture was different—like trying to eat tanned hide. If Robert had not still been

chewing, I would have spit out my mouthful. Bitter juice trickled down my throat. After swallowing, we rinsed our mouths with cognac.

I pulled back a curtain and stared down at the faraway carnival of Chinatown. The bright streets seemed impossibly distant from this room, this dim red parlor where we kept vigil over a corpse without a face. It seemed sad that there was no one to watch over the woman except two strangers looking for a cheap drunk. I wanted to be back down on the streets, back where the endless party of the living held sway, back there dancing with the city night. Not until Robert spoke my name did I realize that the neon had begun to swirl more vividly than ever among the folds of the shroud. On ... off. On ... off.

“We could *look* at her, you know.”

“What?” With an effort I tore my gaze away from the rippling colors. I had no idea what Robert was talking about until I saw his sticky pink smile.

“You’re fucked up,” I told him. So was I, I realized. My voice reverberated from the ceiling. The room seemed smaller than before, shrunken by the enormity of the shroud’s mute presence. I fixed my eyes on Robert. He, at least, was warm flesh. “We can’t do that. Even if I wanted to look at ... *that* ... the old dude would know. He’d see where we unwrapped the shroud.”

“We’d only have to unwrap her legs and hips. We could fix it so he wouldn’t see. He’ll be drunk when he comes back.”

“Robert ...”

“Don’t you want to know if it really *does* open sideways?”

The bad thing was, I did. Ever since Robert had mentioned it in the sweet shop, that tidbit of pornographic trivia kept returning unbidden to my mind. I tried to picture it, failed, and tried again. Privately I had always found the territory between women’s thighs a little frightening anyway—the pink fleshy ruffles like those of a deep-sea creature, the soft dark opening like the valve of some

mysterious heart. To imagine that beneath the shroud might be a thing such as Robert described—

“Unwrap her,” I said. I had to see; suddenly both of us did. The air of the room became tinged with dark excitement, like ectoplasm flowing out of us and bathing the thing in the shroud.

Robert tore at the brittle cloth. It came away easily, exposing the feet and lower legs. The flesh looked dense and waxy, as if nerve and blood vessel and bone had fused into a single mass, as if the legs were solid all the way through. Robert kept unwrapping. From the knees up the skin was smooth and nearly translucent. Robert prodded the thighs, leaving fingerprint-sized dents in the pale flesh. I caught my breath when I saw the black triangle shining from the juncture of her thighs. It might have been a hole cut through her body, a tunnel leading to forever.

Robert couldn't get the legs apart by himself. I took hold of one thigh and Robert clutched the other, as if we meant to break the woman in half like a wishbone. We pulled, and her legs came ratcheting open with a painful noise. *Only shrunken ligaments stretching*, I told myself, *only bone-ends rotating in dry sockets*. For a moment I thought I could see myself from above, as if I floated in a shadowy corner watching Robert and myself pry open the thighs of a corpse. But I could feel the tightness of my eyes, the neutral flesh under my fingers, the low ache in my crotch that throbbed with every beat of my heart.

“There,” breathed Robert. “Now we can look at her. Now we can see—”

He dipped his fingers into the black nest of hair, smoothed it aside, and exposed the dark pink lips of the woman's vagina.

Which, of course, opened vertically. Like that of any other woman.

But Robert was not satisfied. Maybe he had never seen one at all before. His fingers probed further, slipping inside the fleshy lips and parting them, exposing what was *inside* ...

... a single eye. An eye with two dark pupils like twin polliwog eggs in jellied embrace. As it rolled moistly up to look at us, time turned viscous, syrupy. The night seemed to contract to a shining point, a point contained in the crystalline, impossible orb that stared at us from between those four lips like the petals of pink anemones. I heard Robert scream first, ripping the thick silence open ...

... and then we were running. There was one awful moment when I thought I would not be able to get the door open. Robert clawed at my back. Behind his panting I thought I heard the dry rustle of the shroud. A picture came to me: the woman sitting up, the dry cloth falling from her face, eyes sliding open both with the same jellied double pupil, staring blindly after us, not understanding why she had been left alone ...

... and then I wrenched it open and we hurtled down the hall. The flames in the wall-scones burned clear blue as we passed. The hall seemed longer now, the house bigger and more convoluted. Surely we had not passed so many doors coming in, nor had the doors been so tall and ornately peaked. I thought I saw rooms with marble walls like chocolate and vanilla, rooms hung with tapestries of jewels and pearls and golden thread. A rampant lion carved in jade lunged at us from a niche in the wall, and I screamed like a child. Robert dragged me on.

All at once we ran through a door and found ourselves in the moonlit courtyard. Its tranquility seemed sinister now, as if it were waiting for something to happen. The moon had disappeared. We found our way through the maze of corridors, clutching at each other, trying to catch our breath. At the street entrance we met the old man coming politely home in his sober black suit. Was he drunk? I couldn't tell: his eyes were as flat as ever, his little goat's beard sparse but neat. He folded his hands and let us pass.

"Did you enjoy the refreshments?" he inquired.

"Refreshments?" Robert's voice quavered.

"The cognac, of course." The old man seemed to bow to us slightly—but maybe he was just swaying. Maybe he was drunk after

all. "I believe I owe each of you five dollars." He produced a ten and offered it to us, folded between the first and second finger of his withered hand. I could not make myself reach for the bill. Robert hesitated, then grabbed it.

"Mister—" he said. "Mister—did you have some kind of mushrooms in the drawer upstairs? In that makeup case?"

"Mushrooms?" The old man smiled at Robert, and this time I was sure he did bow: a slight ironic inclination of the head, nothing more. "Gentlemen," he said, "all of the mushrooms in Chinatown are poisonous. Except to the Chinese."

He was gone into the shadow of the corridor. Robert stared up at the building. I followed his gaze and saw a curtain twitching in an upstairs window. Neither of us wanted to see what face, if any, would look down at us.

As we began to run again, back toward the neon streets of Chinatown with the purple sky pressing down on our heads and the psychedelic night wrapped around us, I started to feel faintly sick.

1989

The Sixth Sentinel

I first knew hard luck Rosalie Smith when she was a thin frayed rope of a child, twenty years old and already well acquainted with the solitude at the bottom of a whiskey bottle. Her hair was brittle from too many dye jobs, bright red last week, black as the grave today, purple and green for Mardi Gras. Her face was fine-boned and faintly feral, the eyes carefully lined in black, the rouged lips stretched tight over the sharp little teeth. If I had been able to touch Rosalie, her skin would have felt silky and faintly dry, her hair would have been like electricity brushing my face in the dark.

But I could not touch Rosalie, not so that she would notice. I could pass my fingers through the meat of her arm, pale as veal and packed like flaky fish flesh between her thin bones. I could wrap my hand around the smooth porcelain ball of her wrist. But as far as she was concerned, my touch went through her like so much dead air. All she could feel of me was a chill like ice crystallizing along her spine.

“Your liver has the texture of hot, wet velvet,” I would tell her, reaching through her ribs to caress the tortured organ.

She’d shrug. “Another year in this town and it’ll be pickled.”

Rosalie came to the city of New Orleans because it was as far south as her money would take her—or so she said. She was escaping from a lover she would shudderingly refer to only as Joe Coffeespoon. The memory of his touch made her feel cold, far colder than my ectoplasmic fingers ever could, and she longed for the wet kiss of tropical nights.

She moved into an apartment in one of the oldest buildings in the French Quarter, above a “shoppe” that sold potions and philters. At first I wondered whether she would be pleased to find a ghost

already residing in her cramped quarters, but as I watched her decorate the walls with shrouds of black lace and photographs of androgynous sunken-cheeked musicians who looked more dead than alive, I began to realize I could show myself safely, without threat of eviction. It is always a nuisance when someone calls in the exorcist. The priest himself is no threat, but the demons that invariably follow him are large as cats and annoying as mosquitoes. It is these, not the intonations and holy water, that drive innocent spirits away.

But Rosalie only gave me a cool appraising look, introduced herself, then asked me for my name and my tale. The name she recognized, having seen it everywhere from the pages of history books to the shingles hanging outside dubious “absinthe” houses in the French Quarter. The tale—well, there were enough tales to entertain her for a thousand nights or more. (I, the Scheherazade of Baratania Bay!) How long had I wanted to tell those tales? I had been without a friend or a lover for more years than I could recall. (The company of other local ghosts did not interest me—they seemed a morbid lot, many of them headless or drenched in gore, manifesting only occasionally to point skeletal fingers at loose fireplace flagstones and then vanish without a word. I had met no personalities of substance, and certainly none with a history as exotic as mine.)

So I was glad for the company of Rosalie. As more old buildings are demolished I must constantly shift about the city, trying to find places where I resided in life, places where a shred of my soul remains to anchor me. There are still overgrown bayou islands and remote Mississippi coves I visit often, but to give up the drunken carnival of New Orleans, to forsake human companionship (witting or otherwise) would be to fully accept my death. Nearly two hundred years, and I still cannot do that.

“Jean,” she would say to me as evening fell like a slowly drifting purple scarf over the French Quarter, as the golden flames of the streetlights flickered on, “do you like these panties with the silver bustier, Jean?” (She pronounced my name correctly, in the French manner, like John but with the soft J.) Five nights of the week

Rosalie had a job stripping at a nightclub on Bourbon Street. She selected her undress from a vast armoire crammed full of the microscopic wisps of clothing she referred to as “costumes,” some of which were only slightly more substantial than my own flesh. When she first told me of the job she thought I would be shocked, but I laughed. “I saw worse things in my day,” I assured her, thinking of lovely, shameless octoroon girls I had known, of famous “private shows” involving poisonous serpents sent from Haiti and the oiled stone phalluses of alleged voodoo idols.

I went to see Rosalie dance two or three times. The strip club was in an old row building, the former site of a bordello I remembered well. In my day the place had been decorated entirely in scarlet silk and purple velvet; the effect was of enormous fleshy lips closing in upon you as you entered, drawing you into their dark depths. I quit visiting Rosalie at work when she said it unnerved her to suddenly catch sight of me in the hundreds of mirrors that now lined the club, a hundred spangle-fleshed Rosalies and a hundred translucent Jeans and a thousand pathetic weasel-eyed men all reflected to a point of swarming infinity far within the walls. I could see how the mirrors might make Rosalie nervous, but I believe she did not like me looking at the other dancers either, though she was the prettiest of a big-hipped, insipid-faced lot.

By day Rosalie wore black: lace and fishnet, leather and silk, the gaudy mourning clothes of the deather-children. I had to ask her to explain them to me, these deathers. They were children seldom older than eighteen who painted their faces stark white, rimmed their eyes with kohl, smudged their mouths black or blood-red. They made love in cemeteries, then plundered the rotting tombs for crucifixes to wear as jewelry. The music they listened to was alternately lush as a wreath of funeral roses and dark as four a.m., composed in suicidal gloom by the androgynes that decorated Rosalie’s walls. I might have been able to tell these children a few things about death. Try drifting through a hundred years without a proper body, I might have said, without feet to touch the ground, without a tongue to taste wine or kiss. Then perhaps you will

celebrate your life while you have it. But Rosalie would not listen to me when I got on this topic, and she never introduced me to any of her death friends.

If she had any. I had seen other such children roaming the French Quarter after dark, but never in Rosalie's company. Often as not she would sit in her room and drink whiskey on her nights off, tipping inches of liquid amber fire over crackling ice cubes and polishing it off again, again, again. She never had a lover that I knew of, aside from the dreaded Coffeespoon, who it seemed had been quite wealthy by Rosalie's standards. Her customers at the club offered her ludicrous sums if she would only grant them one night of pleasure more exotic than their toadlike minds could imagine. A few might really have been able to pay such fortunes, but Rosalie ignored their tumescent pleading. She seemed not so much opposed to the idea of sex for money as simply uninterested in sex at all.

When she told me of the propositions she received, I thought of the many things I had buried in the earth during my days upon it. Treasure: hard money and jewels, the riches of the robbery that was my bread and butter, the spoils of the murder that was my wine. There were still caches that no one had found and no one ever would. Any one of them would have been worth ten times the amounts these men offered.

Many times I tried to tell Rosalie where these caches were, but unlike some of her kind, she thought buried things should stay buried. She claimed that the thought of the treasure hidden-under mud, stone, or brick, with people walking near it and sometimes right over it each day, amused her more than the thought of digging it up and spending it.

I never believed her. She would not let me see her eyes when she said these things. Her voice trembled when she spoke of the deathers who pursued grave-robbing as a sport. ("They pried up a granite slab that weighed fifty pounds," she told me once, incredulously. "How could they bear to lift it off, in the dark, not knowing what might come out at them?") There was a skeleton in a

glass-topped coffin downstairs, in the voodoo shoppe, and Rosalie hardly liked to enter the shoppe because of it—I had seen her glancing out of the corner of her eye, as if the sad little bones simultaneously intrigued and appalled her.

It was some obsessive fear of hers, I realized. Rosalie shied away from all talk of dead things, of things buried, of digging in the ground. When I told her my tales she made me skip over the parts where treasures or bodies were buried; she would not let me describe the fetor of the nighttime swamp, the faint flickering lights of Saint Elmo's fire, the deep sucking sound the mud made when a shovel was thrust into it. She would allow me no descriptions of burials at sea or shallow bayou graves. She covered her ears when I told her of a rascal whose corpse I hung from the knotted black bough of a hundred-year-old oak. It was a remarkable thing, too—when I rode past the remote spot a year later, his perfect skeleton still hung there, woven together by strands of gray Spanish moss. It wound around his long bones and cascaded from the empty sockets of his eyes, it forced his jaws open and dangled from his chin like a long gray beard—but Rosalie did not want to hear about it.

When I confronted her with her own dread, she refused to own up to it. "Whoever said graveyards were romantic?" she demanded. "Whoever said I had to go digging up bones just because I lust after Venal St. Claire?" (Venal St. Claire was a musician, one of the stick-thin, mourning-shrouded beauties that adorned the walls of Rosalie's room. I saw no evidence that she lusted after him or anyone else.) "I just wear black so that all my clothes will match," she told me solemnly, as if she expected me to believe it. "So I won't have to think about what to put on when I get up in the morning."

"But you *don't* get up in the morning."

"In the evening, then. *You* know what I mean." She tipped her head back and tongued the last drop of whiskey out of her glass. It was the most erotic thing I had ever seen her do. I ran my finger in among the smooth folds of her intestines. A momentary look of discomfort crossed her face, as if she had suffered a gas pain—

attributable to the rotgut whiskey, no doubt. But she would not pursue the subject further.

So I watched her drink until she passed out, her brittle hair fanned across her pillow, the corner of her mouth drooling a tiny thread of spit onto her black silk coverlet. Then I went into her head. This was not a thing I liked to do often—on occasion I had noticed her looking askance at me the morning after, as if she remembered seeing me in her dreams and wondered how I had got there. If I could persuade Rosalie to dig up one cache of loot—just one—our troubles would end. She would never have to work again, and I could have her with me all the time. But first I had to find her fear. Until I knew what it was, and could figure out how to charm my way around it, my treasures were going to stay buried in black bayou mud.

So within moments I was sunk deep in the spongy tissue of Rosalie's brain, sifting through her childhood memories as if they were gold coins I had just lifted off a Spanish galleon. I thought I could smell the whiskey that clouded her dreams, a stinging mist.

I found it more quickly than I expected to. I had reminded Rosalie of her fear, and now—because she would not let her conscious mind remember—her unconscious mind was dreaming of it. For an instant I teetered on the edge of wakefulness; I was dimly aware of the room around me, the heavy furniture and flocked black walls. Then it all swam away as I fell headlong into Rosalie's childhood dream.

A South Louisiana village, built at the confluence of a hundred streams and rivulets. Streets of dirt and crushed oyster-shells, houses built on pilings to keep the water from lapping up onto the neat, brightly painted porches. Shrimp nets draped over railings, stiffening with salt, at some houses; crab traps stacked up to the roof at others. Cajun country.

(Hard Luck Rosalie a Cajun girl, she who claimed she had never set foot in Louisiana before! *Mon petite chou!* "Smith" indeed!)

On one porch a young girl dressed in a T-shirt and a home-sewn skirt of fresh calico perches on a case of empty beer bottles. The

tender points of her breasts can be seen through the thin fabric of the T-shirt. A medallion gleams at the hollow of her throat, a tiny saint frozen in silver. She is perhaps twelve. It can only be her mama beside her, a large regal-faced woman with a crown of teased and fluffed black hair. The mama is peeling crawfish. She saves the heads in a coffee can and throws the other pickings to some speckled chickens scratching in the part of the dirt yard that is not flooded. The water is as high as Mama has ever seen it. The young girl has a can of Coca Cola, but she hasn't drunk much of it. She is worried about something: it can be seen in the slump of her shoulders, in the sprawl of her thin legs beneath the calico skirt. Several times her eyes shimmer with tears she is just able to control. When she looks up, it becomes clear that she is older than she appeared at first, thirteen or fourteen. An air of naivete, an awkwardness of limb and gesture, makes her seem younger. She fidgets and at last says, "Mama?"

"What is it, Rosie?" The mother's voice seems a beat too slow; it catches in her throat and drags itself reluctantly out past her lips.

"Mama—is Theophile still under the ground?"

(There is a gap in the dream here, or rather in my awareness of it. I do not know who Theophile is—a childhood friend perhaps. More likely a brother; in a Cajun family there is no such thing as an only child. The question disturbs me, and I feel Rosalie slipping from me momentarily. Then the dream continues, inexorable, and I am pulled back in.)

Mama struggles to remain calm. Her shoulders bow and her heavy breasts sag against her belly. The stoic expression on her face crumbles a little. "No, Rosie," she says at last. "Theophile's grave is empty. He's gone up to Heaven, him."

"Then he wouldn't be there if I looked?"

(All at once I am able to recognize my Rosalie in the face of this blossoming girl. The intelligent dark eyes, the quick mind behind them undulled by whiskey and time.)

Mama is silent, searching for an answer that will both satisfy and comfort. But a bayou storm has been blowing up, and it arrives suddenly, as they will: thunder rolls across the sky, the air is suddenly alive with invisible sparks. Then the rain comes down in a solid torrent. The speckled chickens scramble under the porch, complaining. Within seconds the yard in front of the house is a sea of mud. It has rained like this every day for a month. It is the wettest spring anyone has ever seen in this part of the bayou.

“You ain’t goin’ anywhere in this flood,” Mama says. The relief is evident in her voice. She shoos the girl inside and hurries around the house to take washing off the line, though the faded cotton dresses and patched denim trousers are already soaked through.

Inside the warm little house, Rosalie sits at the kitchen window watching rain hammer down on the bayou, and she wonders.

The storm lasts all night. Lying in her bed, Rosalie hears the rain on the roof; she hears branches creaking and lashing in the wind. But she is used to thunderstorms, and she pays no attention to this one. She is thinking of a shed in the side yard, where her father’s old crab traps and tools are kept. She knows there is a shovel in there. She knows where the key is.

The storm ends an hour before dawn, and she is ready.

It is her own death she is worried about, of course, not that of Theophile (whoever he may be). She is at the age where her curiosity about the weakness of the flesh outweighs her fear of it. She thinks of him under the ground and she has to know whether he is really there. Has he ascended to Heaven or is he still in his grave, rotting? Whatever she finds, it cannot be worse than the thing she has imagined.

(So I think at the time.)

Rosalie is not feeling entirely sane as she eases out of the silent house, filches her father’s shovel, and creeps through the dark village to the graveyard. She likes to go barefoot, and the soles of her feet are hard enough to walk over the broken edges of the glittering wet oyster-shells, but she knows you have to wear shoes

after a heavy rain or worms might eat their way into your feet. So she slogs through the mud in her soaked sneakers, refusing to think about what she is going to do.

It is still too dark to see, but Rosalie knows her way by heart through these village streets. Soon her hand finds the rusty iron gate of the graveyard, and it ratchets open at her touch. She winces at the harsh sound in the predawn silence, but there is no one around to hear.

At least, no one who can hear.

The crude silhouettes of headstones stab into the inky sky. Few families in the village can afford a carved marker; they lash two sticks together in the shape of a rough cross, or they hew their own stone out of granite if they can get a piece. Rosalie feels her way through a forest of jagged, irregular memorials to the dead. She knows some of them are only hand-lettered oak boards wedged into the ground. The shadows at the base of each marker are wet, shimmering. Foul mud sucks at her feet. She tells herself the smell is only stagnant water. In places the ground feels slick and lumpy; she cannot see what she is stepping on.

But when she comes near the stone she seeks, she can see it. For it is the finest stone in the graveyard, carved of moon-pale marble that seems to pull all light into its milky depths. His family had it made in New Orleans, spending what was probably their life's savings. The chiseled letters are as concise as razor cuts. Rosalie cannot see them, but she knows their every crevice and shadow. Only his name, stark and cold; no dates, no inscriptions, as if the family's grief was so great that they could not bear to say anything about him. Just inscribe it with his name and leave him there.

The plot of earth at the base of the stone is not visible, but she knows it all too well, a barren, muddy rectangle. There has been no time for grass or weeds to grow upon it; he has only been buried a fortnight, and the few sprouts that tried to come up have been beaten back down by the rain. But can he really be under there, shut

up in a box, his lithe body bloating and bursting, his wonderful face and hands beginning to decay?

Rosalie steps forward, hand extended to touch the letters of his name: THEOPHILE THIBO-DEAUX. As she thinks—or dreams—the name, her fingers poised to trace its marble contours, an image fills her head, a jumble of sensations intense and erotic. A boy older than Rosalie, perhaps seventeen: a sharp pale face, too thin to be called handsome, but surely compelling; a curtain of long sleek black hair half-hiding eyes of fierce, burning azure. Theophile!

(All at once it is as if Rosalie's consciousness has merged completely with mine. My heart twists with a young girl's love and lust for this spitfire Cajun boy. I am dimly aware of Rosalie's drunken twenty-year-old body asleep on her bed, her feminine viscera twitching at the memory of him. O, how he touched her—O, how he tasted her!)

She had known it was wrong in the eyes of God. Her mama had raised her to be a good girl. But the evenings she had spent with Theophile after dances and church socials, sitting on an empty dock with his arm around her shoulders, leaning into the warm hollow of his chest—that could not be wrong. After a week of knowing her he had begun to show her the things he wrote on his ink-blackened relic of an Olympia typewriter, poems and stories, songs of the swamp. And that could not be wrong.

And the night they had sneaked out of their houses to meet, the night in the empty boathouse near Theophile's home—that could not be wrong either. They had begun only kissing, but the kisses grew too hot, too wild—Rosalie felt her insides boiling. Theophile answered her heat with his own. She felt him lifting the hem of her skirt and—carefully, almost reverently—sliding off her cotton panties. Then he was stroking the dark down between her legs, teasing her with the very tips of his fingers, rubbing faster and deeper until she felt like a blossom about to burst with sweet nectar. Then he parted her legs wider and bent to kiss her there as tenderly as he had kissed her mouth. His tongue was soft yet rough, like a soapy washcloth, and Rosalie had thought her young body would

die with the pleasure of it. Then, slowly, Theophile was easing himself into her, and yes, she wanted him there, and yes, she was clutching at his back, pulling him farther in, refusing to heed the sharp pain of first entry. He rested inside her, barely moving; he lowered his head to kiss her sore developing nipples, and Rosalie felt the power of all womanhood shudder through her. This could not be wrong.

With the memories fixed firmly in her mind she takes another step toward his headstone. The ground crumbles away beneath her feet, and she falls headlong into her lover's grave.

The shovel whacks her across the spine. The rotten smell billows around her, heavy and ripe: spoiling meat, rancid fat, a sweetish-sickly odor. The fall stuns her. She struggles in the gritty muck, spits it out of her mouth.

Then the first pale light of dawn breaks across the sky, and Rosalie stares into the ruined face of Theophile.

(Now her memories flooded over me like the tide. Some time after they had started meeting in the boathouse she began to feel sick all the time; the heat made her listless. Her monthly blood, which had been coming for only a year, stopped. Mama took her into the next town to see a doctor, and he confirmed what Rosalie had already dreaded: she was going to have Theophile's baby.)

Her papa was not a hard man, nor cruel. But he had been raised in the bosom of the Church, and he had learned to measure his own worth by the honor of his family. Theophile never knew his Rosalie was pregnant. Rosalie's father waited for him in the boathouse one night. He stepped in holding a new sheaf of poems, and Papa's deer shot caught him across the chest and belly, a hundred tiny black eyes weeping red tears.

Papa was locked up in the county jail now and Mama said that soon he would go someplace even worse, someplace where they could never see him again. Mama said it wasn't Rosalie's fault, but Rosalie could see in her eyes that it was.

It has been the wettest spring anyone can remember, a month of steady rains. The water table in Louisiana bayou country is already so high that a hole will begin to draw water at a depth of two feet or less. All this spring the table has risen steadily, soaking the ground, drowning grass and flowers, making a morass of the sweet swamp earth. Cattails have sprung up at the edge of the graveyard. But the storm last night pushed the groundwater to saturation point and beyond. The wealthy folk of New Orleans bury their dead in vaults above ground to protect them from this very danger. But no one here can afford a marble vault, or even a brick one.

And the village graveyard has flooded at last.

Some of the things that have floated to the surface are little more than bone. Others are swollen to three or four times their size, gassy mounds of decomposed flesh rising like islands from the mud; some of these have silk flower petals stuck to them like obscene decorations. Flies rise lazily, then descend again in glittering, circling clouds. Here are mired the warped boards of coffins split open by the water's relentless pull. There floats the plaster figurine of a saint, his face and the color of his robes washed away by rain. Yawning eyeless faces thrust out of stagnant pools, seeming to gasp for breath. Rotting hands unfold like blighted tiger lilies. Every drop of water, every inch of earth in the graveyard is foul with the effluvium of the dead.

But Rosalie can only see the face thrust into hers, the body crushed beneath her own. Theophile's eyes have fallen back into their sockets and his mouth is open; his tongue is gone. She sees thin white worms teeming in the passage of his throat. His nostrils are widening black holes beginning to encroach upon the greenish flesh of his cheeks. His sleek hair is almost gone; the few strands left are thin and scummy, nibbled by waterbugs. (Sitting on the dock, Rosalie and Theophile used to spit into the water and watch the shiny black beetles swarm around the white gobs; Theophile had told her they would eat hair and toenails too.) In places she can see the glistening dome of his skull. *The skull behind the dear face; the skull that cradled the thoughts and dreams ...*

She thinks of the shovel she brought and wonders what she meant to do with it. Did she *want* to see Theophile like this? Or had she really expected to find his grave empty, his fine young body gone fresh and whole to God?

No. She had only wanted to know where he was. Because she had nothing left of him—his family would give her no poems, no lock of hair. And now she had even lost his seed.

(The dogs ran Papa to earth in the swamp where he had hidden and the men dragged him off to jail. As they led him toward the police car, Theophile's mother ran up to him and spat in his face. Papa was handcuffed and could not wipe himself; he only stood there with the sour spit of sorrow running down his cheeks, and his eyes looked confused, as if he was unsure just what he had done.

Mama made Rosalie sleep in bed with her that night. But when Rosalie woke up the next morning Mama was gone; there was only a note saying she would be back before sundown. Sure enough, she straggled in with the afternoon's last light. She had spent the whole day in the swamp. Her face was scratched and sweaty, the cuffs of her jeans caked with mud.

Mama had brought back a basketful of herbs. She didn't fix dinner, but instead spent the evening boiling the plants down to a thin syrup. They exuded a bitter, stinging scent as they cooked. The potion sat cooling until the next night. Then Mama made Rosalie drink it all down.

It was the worst pain she had ever felt. She thought her intestines and her womb and the bones of her pelvis were being wrung in a giant merciless fist. When the bleeding started she thought her very insides were dissolving. There were thick clots and ragged shreds of tissue in the blood.

"It won't damage you," Mama told her, "and it will be over by morning."

True to Mama's word, just before dawn Rosalie felt something solid being squeezed out of her. She knew she was losing the last of Theophile. She tried to clamp the walls of her vagina around it, to

keep him inside her as long as she could. But the thing was slick and formless, and it slid easily onto the towel Mama had spread between her legs. Mama gathered the towel up quickly and would not let Rosalie see what was inside.

Rosalie heard the toilet flush once, then twice. Her womb and the muscles of her abdomen felt as if they had gone through Mama's kitchen grater. But the pain was nothing compared to the emptiness she felt in her heart.)

The sky is growing lighter, showing her more of the graveyard around her: the corpses borne on the rising water, the maggot-ridden mud. Theophile's face yawns into hers. Rosalie struggles against him and feels his sodden flesh give beneath her weight. She is beyond recognizing her love now. She is frantic; she fights him. Her hand strikes his belly and punches in up to the wrist.

Then suddenly Theophile's body opens like a flower made of carrion, and she sinks into him. Her elbows are trapped in the brittle cage of his ribs. Her face is pressed into the bitter soup of his organs. Rosalie whips her head to one side. Her face is a mask of putrescence. It is in her hair, her nostrils; it films her eyes. She is drowning in the body that once gave her sustenance. She opens her mouth to scream and feels things squirming in between her teeth.

"My *cherie* Rosalie," she hears the voice of her lover whispering.

And then the rain pours down again.

Unpleasant.

I tore myself screaming from Rosalie—screaming silently, unwilling to wake her. In that instant I was afraid of her for what she had gone through; I dreaded to see her eyes snap open like a doll's, meeting me full in the face.

But Rosalie was only sleeping a troubled slumber. She muttered fitful disjointed words; there was a cold sheen of sweat on her brow; she exuded a flowery, powerful smell of sex. I hovered at the edge of the bed and studied her ringed hands clenched into small fists, her darting, jumping eyelids still stained with yesterday's makeup. I

could only imagine the ensuing years and torments that had brought that little girl to this night, to this room. That had made her want to wear the false trappings of death, after having wallowed in the truth of it.

But I *knew* how difficult it would be to talk these memories out of her. There could be no consolation and no compensation for a past so cruel. No treasure, no matter how valuable, could matter in the face of such lurid terror.

So I assure you that the thing I did next was done out of pure mercy—not a desire for personal gain, or control over Rosalie. I had never done such a thing to her before. She was my friend; I wished to deliver her from the poison of her memories. It was as simple as that.

I gathered up my courage and I went back into Rosalie's head. Back in through her eyes and the whorled tunnels of her ears, back into the spongy electric forest of her brain.

I cannot be more scientific than this: I found the connections that made the memory. I searched out the nerves and subtle acids that composed the dream, the morsels of Rosalie's brain that still held a residue of Theophile, the cells that were blighted by his death.

And I erased it all.

I pitied Theophile. Truly I did. There is no existence more lonely than death, especially a death where no one is left to mourn you.

But Rosalie belonged to me now.

I had her rent a boat.

It was easy for her to learn how to drive it: boating is in the Cajun blood. We made an exploratory jaunt or two down through Barataria—where two tiny hamlets, much like Rosalie's home village, both bore my name—and I regaled a fascinated Rosalie with tales of burials at sea, of shallow bayou graves, of a rascal whose empty eye sockets dripped with Spanish moss.

When I judged her ready, I guided her to a spot I remembered well, a clearing where five enormous oaks grew from one immense, twisted trunk. The five sentinels, we called them in my day. The wind souged in the upper branches. The swamp around us was hushed, expectant.

After an hour of digging, Rosalie's shiny new shovel unearthed the lid and upper portion of a great iron chest. Her brittle hair was stringy with sweat. Her black lace dress was caked with mud and clay. Her face had gone paler than usual with exertion; in the half-light of the swamp it was almost luminescent. She had never looked so beautiful to me as she did at that moment.

She stared at me. Her tired eyes glittered as if with fever.

"Open it," I urged.

Rosalie swung the shovel at the heart-shaped hasp of the chest and knocked it loose on the first try. Once more and it fell away in a shower of soggy rust. She glanced back at me once more—looking for what, I wonder; seeing what?—and then heaved open the heavy lid.

And the sixth sentinel sat up to greet her.

I always took an extra man along when I went into the swamp to bury treasure. One I didn't trust, or didn't need. He and my reliable henchmen would dig the hole and drag the chest to the edge of it, ready to heave in. Then I would gaze deep into the eyes of each man and ask, in a voice both quiet and compelling, "Who wishes to guard my treasure?" My men knew the routine, and were silent. The extra man—currying favor as the useless and unreliable will do—always volunteered.

Then my top lieutenant would take three steps forward and put a ball in the lowly one's brain. His corpse was laid tenderly in the chest, his blood seeping into the mounds of gold or silver or glittering jewels, and I would tuck in one of my mojo bags, the ones I had specially made in New Orleans. Then the chest was sunk in the mire of the swamp, and my man, now rendered trustworthy, was left to guard my treasure until I should need it.

I was the only one who could open those chests. The combined magic of the mojo bag and the anger of the betrayed man's spirit saw to that.

My sixth sentinel wrapped skeletal arms around Rosalie's neck and drew her down. His jaws yawned wide and I saw teeth, still hungry after two hundred years, clamp down on her throat.

A mist of blood hung in the air; from the chest there was a ripping sound, then a noise of quick, choking agony. I hoped he would not make it too painful for her. After all, she was the woman I had chosen to spend eternity with.

I had told Rosalie that she would never again have to wriggle out of flimsy costumes under the eyes of slobbering men, and I had not lied. I had told her that she would never have to worry about money any more, and I had not lied. What I had neglected to tell her was that I did not wish to share my treasures—I only wanted her dead, my Hard Luck Rosalie, free from this world that pained her so, free to wander with me through the unspoiled swamps and bayous, through the ancient buildings of a city mired in time.

Soon Rosalie's spirit left her body and flew to me. It had nowhere else to go. I felt her struggling furiously against my love, but she would give in soon. I had no shortage of time to convince her.

I slipped my arm around Rosalie's neck and planted a kiss on her ectoplasmic lips. Then I clasped her wisp of a hand in mine, and we disappeared together.

Missing

It was high summer and the breeze coming over the levee from the river carried a hint of cleanly rotting fish, a phantom of oyster shell still slick with silver glue. There was another smell on the breeze, something browner, from a deeper part of the river, a smell that might make night strollers quicken their step and look away from the middle of the darkly shining water.

“Someone drowned a week ago,” said Andrew, and Lucian answered, “Bullshit—it’s sewage.”

But it was the smell, along with the heat like a dirty, oily blanket, that drove them out of the nightclub. Notes descending on a saxophone followed them into the street like a string of colored beads. In the street the smell was still noticeable, but it mingled with the grease-dripping odor of frying oysters, the sharp scent of oil paints and turpentine left behind by the street artists who had all gone home hours ago. Jackson Square brooded behind dark curlicues of iron. Within, pigeons might roost, a needle might roll from one unhappy hand to another.

Lucian pressed his face briefly against the railing. It was cool against his smooth pale cheek, but when he turned back to Andrew, a dirty stripe bisected his nose and forehead.

Andrew spit on a handkerchief and dabbed at Lucian’s face. “For God’s sake don’t lick your lips now. A thousand diseases on that railing.” Lucian twisted halfheartedly away from the sticky handkerchief, smiling.

Although they had left their nightclub, the club at which they listened to whatever might be new and sometimes played their own music, their night’s drinking was far from over. On their way to Lucian’s room they passed a lone, shabby man bent over backwards

pointing a wailing saxophone at the sky. A crack somewhere deep inside the instrument made the notes rattle like bones, but Andrew dug out a quarter and aimed it at the shoe box by the man's feet. The quarter bounced out and rolled across the sidewalk, but the man didn't stop playing.

They passed a pizza parlor that reeked of tomatoes stewed in oregano and a foreign grocery which, though closed, wafted out a thousand mysterious, delicious smells, the smells of a kitchen in the Great Pyramid. Under it all they could still sense the wet brown river scent. Lucian's narrow nostrils widened imperceptibly.

They passed along the streets in silence, two white non-jazz musicians stirring up air in the French Quarter. The buildings they passed grew darker, more broken. Feet padded along behind them for two blocks, then, deterred by Andrew's wide-shouldered bulk, disappeared down a side street that led toward the river.

A few minutes later Lucian passed a broken street light, turned down an alley, and nudged a heavy door open with his shoulder. They ducked under a flapping black curtain, sending down a rain of dust, and emerged in a dark little shop lit by two kerosene lamps. Orange shadows licked at the walls of the shop, which were lined with shelves of tiny bottles and boxes. The bottles were queerly shaped, long-necked, made of thick ancient glass colored blue and amber, with stoppers instead of screw-on caps. Most of their contents were murky and indecipherable. The boxes gave off an odor of moldy cardboard. It was easy to imagine clicking, roiling nests of insects in the dark corners of the shelves.

Lucian stood slightly stiff-necked, embarrassed, staring at a spot somewhere to the left of the woman who sat in a corner of the shop.

"Good evening, Mrs. Carstairs. How's business?"

"As always. No one comes. No one wants magic anymore." The woman pulled a gray blanket more snugly around her shoulders. At her feet sat a bowl of colorless mush, perhaps oatmeal, in which a bent spoon was buried at an angle.

“Sorry to hear it. We’ll just go on upstairs, then.” Lucian ducked through another curtain at the back of the shop. Andrew heard him clattering up a flight of stairs. He looked back at Lucian’s landlady, who didn’t appear to have noticed him. She was busily scratching herself under the gray blanket. His knee banged the corner of a long wooden box. He stiffened but couldn’t keep from glancing down.

Under the glass top the thin little figure reclined, grinning up at him. It should have been a skeleton, but a thin layer of iridescent parchment still stretched over its face and the ratty framework of its hands, and he thought there were small, opaque marbles left deep in its eyesockets—he had never let himself look closely enough to be sure. A few dry strands of bone-colored hair twisted across a rotten silk pillow.

“It isn’t hard to do,” said Mrs. Carstairs, “if you love them enough.”

Andrew stared back at her. She made no acknowledgement of what she had said, turned her nodding head not an inch in his direction, but only huddled serenely, surrounded by vials of powdered bat’s tongue, boxes which contained fragments of the bones of saints and murdered men. And at her feet sat a bowl that might be oatmeal. Andrew swallowed the sour spit in his mouth and hurried up the stairs after Lucian.

Lucian had rummaged in his failing little refrigerator and found a bottle of beer for Andrew. For himself he had pulled out a Donald Duck orange juice bottle half full of a violet sludge. It was vodka mixed nearly half-and-half with a cheap Japanese plum wine that seemed to have about the same consistency as ketchup. It was vile, and it filled the tiny room with a rotten fruity smell that stayed in Lucian’s clothes. Lucian claimed the concoction could get him drunk faster than anything else on earth.

He sloshed some of it into a jelly jar that still had gray-white label scrapings on its side. At the first sip, his long eyelashes lowered in contentment; this was the taste he knew like the inside of a lover’s mouth, the taste of his world. He took another gulp and lay back on

his unmade bed, gazing past Andrew at the window. The moon's weak glow was diluted and made greasy by the dirty glass.

Andrew watched him. Lucian was languid now. In the street there was always a certain tension to his shoulders and slender neck, because Lucian was slight and exquisite-looking and wore silky little scarves and long black jackets that made him look rich even though he wasn't. When he wasn't being prodded for money he didn't have, he was being harassed for the European fineness of his face, and on the darkest, narrowest streets his eyes took on a watchful look. Andrew, who was large and Aryanly handsome, usually walked home with his friend on late nights, not minding the long, lonely walk back to his own apartment.

Lucian nudged his shoes off. He wasn't wearing any socks. He shook a few strands of feathery hair, dark auburn delicately frosted with silver-blond, out of his eyes and smiled at Andrew over the rim of his jelly jar. Andrew stood up, stretching, nearly knocking over his rickety chair. The ceiling of this room was unusually low. It was all right for Lucian, but Andrew, who was half a foot taller, felt clumsy and claustrophobic here. "Do you mind if I open a window?"

"By all means, open a window—any window will do." Lucian's voice was heavy with plum wine and sarcasm; there was only one tiny window in the room. Andrew shoved at its smeary glass until it slid up. He hadn't heard Lucian move, but when he turned back to the room, Lucian was holding out a fresh beer. Their fingers kissed briefly and sweat-stickily as Andrew took the bottle.

Lucian's fingers were longer than the palms they stemmed from, very slim and clean, slightly flattened at the tips. The tips had been splayed and pressed out by Lucian's Juno, the only expensive thing in the room. It stood on four stilt legs in a corner behind Andrew, its black and white keys gleaming opaquely in the half-light from the window. Lucian's fingertips hid a crystalline magic, a sense of tone and pressure that could milk every spangle, every drop of color from a piece of music. He stayed in his room during the day, sleeping naked and innocent through the hottest part of the afternoon, then playing till nightfall, pulling spills and showers of notes from the

battered little Juno to float out the window, to drift downstairs and be smothered among Mrs. Carstairs' bottles and packets. Once every month a check arrived from a faceless, sexless relative in Baton Rouge. For a few days Lucian and Andrew would eat in prettily decorated restaurants, drink in well-lit, airy bars outside the French Quarter. Then it was back to dark clubs and sludgy plum wine until the next check came. Andrew could sing; the lyrics he wrote were attempts to capture in words the shimmering transparency of Lucian's music, and he could barely play guitar. They tried to expand the boundaries of all the music they had ever heard, composing intricate symphonies together whenever Mrs. Carstairs was too caught up in her rituals to bang on her ceiling with a broom handle.

Lucian stretched out his feet, flexing his toes comfortably. His toenails were the color of pearls, faintly shiny. He slurped down the last drops of violet sludge and filled the jelly jar again. "That skeleton—" Andrew began.

"What skeleton?"

"The one downstairs."

"Oh, Mrs. Carstairs' corpse. Very charming."

"Why do you suppose she keeps it? Is it some kind of weird advertisement?"

"It's her husband. Was."

"No!"

"Something like that. It's too small to be a man's body, isn't it? Her child, then. She told me about it at great length once. If I'd been sober it would have shocked me."

"The skeleton of her child? In a glass box?"

"It died a long time ago. Her one and only, I guess. She couldn't stand to bury it and let it rot. She's a witch, you know, or calls herself one. She knew how to make it dry up. Mummify it."

"Didn't she have to take the in sides out?"

"I suppose so. God, Andrew, forget it."

Andrew stopped talking about it but did not forget it. His eyes drifted and came to rest on Lucian's midsection. Lucian had unbuttoned his shirt, and the hollows in his slatted ribcage were full of silver shadow. Andrew watched the narrow chest expand and collapse again and again. His mind slipped back to the little body downstairs. Mrs. Carstairs would have gone to bed by now, so it was alone down there, keeping company with the dusty bottles and nests of roaches. Perhaps a faint phosphorescence lit the spaces between its bones.

Mrs. Carstairs had been unable to let go of the child completely; she had clung to the only part of it left to her, and perhaps if she pressed her forehead to the glass she could catch its sleeping thoughts. She had preserved the essence of the child, the cleanest part. She had seen parts of its body no one had been meant to see, but those parts were gone now. He imagined its chest cavity stuffed with fragrant linen, its skull scoured with dry spices. It was an ivory being, a husk.

Lucian pressed his lips together, stifling a yawn. It overcame him and his jaws gaped. Andrew glimpsed two rows of even teeth, a soft little tongue stained purple. "It's late," Lucian said. "I want to go to bed."

"Play for me first."

"It's too late."

"Please. Just a little."

Lucian's eyes flicked heavenward, but he was smiling. "Five minutes. No more."

He positioned himself behind the Juno, pressed buttons, twisted the volume knob nearly to zero. His eyelashes, black in the murky light, swept his pale cheeks. His hands moved and a flood of notes erupted, pouring away, cutting through the damp, heavy air in the room.

Andrew leaned forward, lips slightly parted. The music swelled and shattered. Each shard was a fragment of colored glass, a particle of spice. He closed his eyes and watched the music weave a tapestry

across the insides of his eyelids. Its colors were streaky and bright, glittering.

When he realized that he was hearing nothing, he opened his eyes. Lucian had stopped playing and was sniffing the air. The tip of his straight nose twitched.

“There’s that damn rotten smell again.”

Andrew pulled in a noseful of air. The full, wet smell was there again, under the fruity odor of the wine and the tangy, private scent of their sweat. Andrew nodded. Lucian shrugged. “I can’t do anything about it. It’s too hot to close the window.” He grew brisk. “There. You’ve had your music. It’s late; go home. I’ll see you tomorrow night.” He pushed Andrew toward the door.

Andrew knew Lucian would undress and lie in bed with the orange juice bottle next to him, drinking until the needling heat became a faraway thing, beneath notice, and sleep was possible. At the door Andrew turned back, not sure why he was doing such an unfamiliar and faintly embarrassing thing, and put his arms around Lucian. Lucian stiffened, surprised; then he decided to go along with it and slipped his arms awkwardly around Andrew’s neck. It was a brief, clumsy hug, but when it was over, Andrew felt obscurely better. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Don’t you always?”

A car ground by outside and in its shifting light a band of shadow slid across Lucian’s eyes. Lucian’s lips curved in a forlorn smile.

Andrew picked his way down the stairs. Lucian held the door open to give Andrew whatever light could be had; as he ducked under the curtain Andrew heard the door click shut. He stood in the dark shop for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the light filtered and masked by Mrs. Carstairs’ heavy black draperies. When he took a step forward, his shoe struck the corner of the long wooden box. The glass shivered. He sensed something shifting inside, settling. If he pulled aside the draperies, let in the hazy moonlight, he would see—

He didn't want to. He headed for where he knew the door was, and had one bad moment when his hand found instead the thick, moist velvet of the draperies; then he was outside looking up at Lucian's window, which was as dark as any other window in the sprawling block of buildings.

Back in his clean studio apartment, with a fan whirring at the foot of his bed and a street light glowing comfortably outside his window, Andrew brought his cassette player to bed with him and was lulled to sleep by a cascade of shimmering notes, the one tape Lucian had allowed him to make of their music. The notes swirled around Andrew's room looking for a crack, a hole, a route of escape. Eventually they slipped under the door and floated away on an eddy of wind toward the river.

The next day was hotter and more humid; people gasped in the streets like swimmers, and flies swarmed in glistening blue-green clouds above piles of garbage. The day smelled of coconut suntan lotion and seafood being deepfried in hot oil. As the shadows in the streets lengthened and the colors of the day deepened into smudgy blues and violets, Andrew made his way back to Lucian's room. The brown river smell had begun to creep back into the air. As Andrew nudged through the empty shop and climbed the stairs, the smell deepened and grew soft around the edges.

Lucian was still in bed. A sheet was twisted between his legs and pulled up across his body. Its corner touched one of his pale pink nipples.

Andrew knelt beside the bed. A warm dampness soaked through the knees of his pants, thick and sticky. He was kneeling in a puddle of vodka and plum wine. The fruity odor had grown sour in the heat. Lucian's long eyelashes were poised just above his cheeks, ready to sweep down. Andrew touched Lucian's hand. The fingers were stiff; he heard the clean sharp nails scratching delicately against the sheet under the pressure of his own hand. A bright cardboard package lay on the floor next to the bed: DozEze. Sleeping pills. Only two were gone. Lucian had not meant it, then.

Andrew buried his face in the sheet, smelling cotton, a ghost of detergent, old sweat, all edged with the brown smell of the river. Neon patterns that swelled and burst behind his eyelids, resolved themselves into Lucian's face. The silky dark lashes, the dulling white glimmer behind the lowered lids, the parted pink lips were too lovely, too alone.

Andrew squeezed his eyes more tightly shut. How could he leave this room now? How could he give the proper authorities the signal to descend on this lonely little body with scalpels and death certificates and jars of formaldehyde?

After a few minutes he gently pushed Lucian to one side and lay down next to him.

This was a warm night, but they were beginning to cool off; there would be no more sweltering sheetless midnights, no more parched red days. Andrew rubbed at the smeary glass of the window and peered out. The man with the saxophone was still there, bending and writhing under the broken street light. Stupid place for a street musician. No one ever passed by here. Andrew had shut the window so he wouldn't have to hear the dying-cat wailing.

He switched on the Juno and poked tentatively at a few keys. The sounds they made were pretty, but there was no crystalline waterfall of notes, no undercurrent of magic dust. Still, he was getting better, already was better on the keyboard than he had ever been on the guitar.

He crossed the room and sat on the floor at the foot of the bed, resting his forehead on the corner of the long wooden box he had constructed. The edge of the glass top dug into his eyebrow.

Andrew didn't have to remember to breathe shallowly any more; he did it without thinking about it. He had none of the secrets of the woman downstairs, the witch, and the smell up here was very brown, very wet. That would pass in time. Lucian would be clean again; at last he would achieve a primal state of purity. Andrew thought of sticks of ivory, of dry perfumed husks.

He raised his head and looked into the box.

1985

Footprints in the Water

Dru sat at his desk for hours, hunching his bony shoulders, never bothering to push the childishly fair hair out of his face, staring until he still saw the roundabout in front of his eyes when he blinked. When he closed his eyes, a bright phantom roundabout swam in the pinpricked phosphorescent darkness behind his eyelids. When he opened them, the roundabout was tauntingly solid and still, a needle stuck in a cork, a folded triangle of paper balanced on the tip of a needle. He squinted at it, stared without blinking, visualized the piece of paper beginning to turn as the author of the book on psychic power had said to do. He willed it to turn. He blew on it to see what it looked like turning, then tried to keep it turning by the force of his mind. He vowed he would not close his eyes again until the paper began to turn. He touched it with the tip of his finger and made it turn, pushed it with his mind, forced his will upon it. It sat still, a pale brown creased slip of paper balanced on the tip of a rusty needle. It would turn. It would turn. It had to turn. He knew he could harness every scrap of power that nestled in every corner of his brain if only he could make that roundabout turn. He pushed at it with his mind. He would not close his eyes. His eyelids were stretched open. His eyeballs were dry, burning. If he blinked now, the lids would scrape against his eyes. The roundabout swam and began to dissolve, fading into a field of light that crept in from the edges of his vision. The slip of paper was absolutely still, stirred by no breath, no current. It would never turn.

In disgust, Dru squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head away. The needle shot up out of the cork and skimmed past his face, just missing his eye, scratching his cheek deeply enough to make him need three stitches. Bright and vital drops of blood spattered the roundabout, soaked into the tipped-over cork.

Dru was fifteen then. After that, he knew, the earth was his.

Nineveh. Pacing through the crop of stones, the only pale thing in a black night. Nineveh always dresses in white now, white silk jacket, white shoes with soft white soles, hair of the palest silver-blond falling like wings of light along his pale, pale cheeks and forehead. He moves through the yard. A brittle slice of moon gives off a cold light, fluorescently harsh, in which Nineveh nearly disappears. He cannot live in harsh light. Harsh light is for the electric white ceilings of morgues. The stones glitter and he moves among them, paler than they are and less sharp-edged. The moonlight paints the stones, runs off them and soaks the ground; at the base of each stone is its black reflection. The mirror image of a gravestone. But there can be no more mirror images. All is lost. Your mirror image only dazzles and sinks as you stare into his eyes, his eyes obscured by black water. The moon is not Nineveh's twin.

He stops and stands over a stone, his eyes hidden under a wing of silvery hair, but perhaps glittering, painted by the moon. His feet are hidden in the black pool at the base of the stone. The shadow melts over his ankles. He stands there until the moon, no longer hard-edged, fades into a delicate yellow-pink sky that becomes whitely hot by midday. The sun bleaches the grass and the stones. It cannot burn Nineveh's pale, pale skin: his cheeks never show a tinge of rose; his lips are translucent. The sunlight, hot as white metal, burns a sheet of fire into the gravestone of his twin brother.

The house of Frixtons, Dru's mother and father, began to be plagued. Records, books, random desirable things appeared on Dru's bed, things he had seen in shops but hadn't been able to stretch his pocket money to buy. His parents made him return them to the shops, but they kept coming back. Water and a slightly thicker, clear substance drooled from the ceiling, but the plaster was always found to be dry to the touch. Often the walls shook with invisible raps, and objects—antique chairs, marble eggs, small Chinese statues—flew about like heavy wingless birds. When Dru told the

disturbances to stop, they ceased, but would begin again within a few hours.

Dru still sat hunched at his desk over the roundabout, his hair hanging in his eyes, a long, slender tail of a braid snaking halfway down his back. Sometimes he pulled the braid up over his shoulder and sucked absently at it, staring at the roundabout, staring, willing. He still could not make it turn. He could slam doors without looking at them; he could make an empty glass fill up with water; he could make a small truck roll up a hill and stop, but that tiny, creased piece of paper stayed still. Now and then a breath of air stirred it, and his heart leaped. He turned sixteen, seventeen. His fair hair darkened two shades.

Dru was interviewed, tested in laboratories. He bent spoons, emerged from empty locked rooms. They put a paper-and-cork roundabout in front of him, but he could not make it go around. He produced living snakes out of the air; they were albino, and their eyes were always red. Two books were published, a scholarly journal study, and a glossy paperback with a mystic eye on the front. Both featured the name Dru Frixton prominently on their covers. When Dru was eighteen, he caused a mouse's neck to be broken by an invisible blow. After the mouse had been examined and pronounced dead, Dru restored it to life.

Headlines glared off the newspapers. Nineveh's pale hand rested on the glossy cover of the paperback. His finger sought the address of the publisher, whereby this boy might be found, and hovered indecisively: he could not write the letter.

Nineveh's twin brother Dylan had been dead three years.

Dylan is laughing. The inside of his mouth is dark pink and his eyes are wet and happy. He was never as pale as Nineveh, never as colorless; now he seems a warm and joyous blaze of color, with his bright hair, with his pink laughing mouth. He shakes his head and his mouth opens wider, and he beats his hands on his knees helplessly as he used to do when he couldn't stop laughing, back

when he and Nineveh were children. Now he is laughing at himself for laughing so much, and his laughter is breathy and jagged. He must ache from so much laughing. His hand is in the air, messing Nineveh's hair, entwined there. He teases Nineveh for being so neat, so pale, and a smile touches Nineveh's lips. Nineveh's only smiles are for Dylan. They are floating together in water, water as warm and thick as the sea they must have shared before they were born. Dylan's mouth is closed now; open, closed on Nineveh's, wet. And the water is black. Black under an electric white sky. Dylan is being sucked into a glittering black vortex of water. His mouth is open, gulping for air, and Nineveh wants to shout not to do that, not to swallow the water, that the black water is bitter, bilious, poisonous. Nineveh cannot hang on to his brother's hand. Dylan is pulling away, screaming for Nineveh to let go, not to get sucked in with him. He is screaming for Nineveh to save himself. His voice is choked, gulping. Dylan is strangling on the black water. It is seeping into his lungs, covering his head. And with the last semiconscious effort he can make, he pushes Nineveh away from the vortex, wills him with smooth, strong strokes toward the white shore far in the distance. When Nineveh has made it halfway there, Dylan's face floats up in the water beside him, still under the water, under the glossy black film, and Dylan's eyes are open and full of water and his mouth is open, gaping, letting the water fill him—

Nineveh surfaces from the dream screaming, floundering in the white sea of his bed. The sheets twine over his mouth and he spits them out; they are dry. He reaches for Dylan's hand, tries to touch Dylan's face before he remembers that the dream is real. Drowned. Drowned on holiday, far out in the water where no one could see them, not parents, not even God. Nineveh's idea to swim out there with Dylan. Drowned. All Nineveh's smiles, drowned. His love gone into the black water.

Nineveh's trailing hand touches the cover of the glossy paperback on the floor, next to the bed. His fingers pause over it for a moment; then he strokes it gently and takes it into bed with him, flipping through the pages again.

Dru has taken to wearing black eyeliner when he and Nineveh meet. They sit in the coffeeshop, ignoring the afternoon outside. Dru's fingers pull the braid over his shoulder and twist it, play with it. Several times he brings it to his lips and takes it away again. He is dressed in black. Nineveh, luminescently pale in the coffeeshop gloom, stirs sugar into his tea.

Three years, says Dru.

Nineveh is quiet.

Transfer of energy into matter, says Dru. Infusion of the life force into inanimate matter. Transport of an entity from place to place through another dimension. Restoration.

Nineveh will not meet his eyes.

Dru becomes ashamed of his cheap mediumistic babble. He makes Nineveh's tea cup slide away, dance on its rim around the edges of the table, and return to rest primly between Nineveh's outstretched hands on the tabletop. Not a drop of tea is spilled.

Nineveh smiles. His lips are very pale. Glory, he says.

It is a night of drooling rain and sluggish, dim flashes of lightning. Dru is in Nineveh's house, in the bed where Dylan once slept. The sheets are white and cold. On the couch, Nineveh pretends to sleep.

Dru is concentrating, willing, pushing his mind. The tip of his braid is in his mouth; he sucks fiercely without being aware of it. Behind Dru's eyelids, the field of stones spreads. The stones glisten with moonlight filtered through clouds and the wetness of the viscous rain. A stirring. A rupturing. Dru gasps; his black-rimmed eyes fly open. Glory wasn't worth the price.

Minutes later, the mud outside the front door sucks with footsteps. Nineveh darts to answer a knock at the door.

Dru huddles under the cold sheet, trying to disappear into the sea of white. The smell is not what he had expected. No corruption, no gray-green fluid rot. A dark, wet smell, this, a smell of earthworms, of soggy leaves disintegrating and falling away under the ground.

I could have loved bones, says Nineveh's voice.

Independent of his brain, Dru's fingers twist the sheet away from his face. Two shapes are in the doorway. No shadows-and-bars framework of bones. A mass far softer and darker. A black smiling mouth with black gums. Somehow he had expected the eyes to be red, like those of the snakes he materialized. But they are dark, softly, deeply dark, far darker than they could be if there were anything in the sockets. The shape shifts in the doorway. Nineveh is holding its hand.

You are glorious, says Nineveh to Dru.

So you are, says another voice, a wet, gulping parody of Nineveh's. The shapes move toward the bed.

How can you harm me? asks Dru. His voice quavers. The tip of his braid slips out of his mouth and streaks his cheek with spit.

Harm you? says the gulping voice. I love you. You gave me back my life.

And mine, says Nineveh.

Two figures slip into the bed, one so pale it seems to fade into the sheets, one dark and seeping. Their hands are touching Dru. His skin is streaked with darkness. On his lips is the taste of rot, soft and dark and sweet. He realizes that he is being kissed.

Dylan's mouth is open now. Open, wet.



How to Get Ahead in New York

Consider this scene:

Four A.M. in the Port Authority bus terminal, New York City. The Port Authority is a bad place at the best of times, a place where Lovecraft's wrong geometry might well hold sway. The master of purple prose maintained that the human mind could be driven mad by contemplation of angles subtly skewed, of other planes where the three corners of a triangle might add up to less than a hundred and eighty degrees, or to more.

Such is the Port Authority: even in the bustle of midday, corners do not appear to meet up quite right; corridors seem to slope from one end to the other. Even in full daylight, the Port Authority terminal is a bad place. At five A.M. it is wholly soulless.

Consider two young men just off a Greyhound from North Carolina. They were not brothers, but they might be thought brothers, although they looked nothing alike: it was suggested in the way the taller one, crow-black hair shoved messily behind his ears, kept close to his fairhaired companion as if protecting him. It was implied in the way they looked around the empty terminal and then glanced at each other, exchanging bad impressions without saying a word. They were not brothers, but they had known each other since childhood, and neither had ever been to New York before.

The corridor was flooded with dead fluorescent light. They had seen an EXIT sign pointing this way, but the corridor ended in a steel door marked NO ADMITTANCE. Should anyone find this message ambiguous, a heavy chain had been looped through the door handle and snapped shut with a padlock as large as a good-sized fist.

The fair boy turned around in a complete circle, lifted his head and flared his nostrils. His pale blue eyes slipped halfway shut, the lids fluttering. His friend watched him warily. After a minute he came out of it, shook himself a little, still nervous. “I don’t like it here, Steve. I can’t find my way anywhere.”

Steve didn’t like it either, wished they could have avoided the terminal altogether. They’d planned to drive up, but Steve’s old T-bird had developed an alarming engine knock which threatened to become a death rattle if not dealt with kindly. The trip was all planned; they were booked to play at a club in the East Village—but they also meant to embark on a cross country road trip next month. Steve left the car with his mechanic, telling him to fix it or scrap the motherfucker, Steve didn’t care which. Ghost stood by half-smiling, listening to this exchange. Then, while Steve was still bitching, he had walked up the street to the Farmers Hardware store that doubled as Missing Mile’s bus station and charged two round trip tickets to his credit card. He hated using that card, hated the feel of the thing in his pocket, but this surely counted as an emergency. That same night they were New York bound.

“It’s just the damn *bus station*,” Steve said. “You ever know a town that could be judged by its bus station?” But as usual, there was no use arguing with Ghost’s intuition. The place set Steve’s teeth on edge too.

Ghost hitched his backpack up on his shoulder. They turned away from the padlocked door and tried to retrace their steps, but every corridor seemed to lead further into the bowels of the place. The soft sound of Ghost’s sneakers and the sharp clatter of Steve’s bootheels echoed back at them: *shush-clop, shush-clop*. Through Ghost’s thin T-shirt Steve saw the sharp winglike jut of his shoulderblades, the shadowed knobs of his spine. The strap of the backpack pulled Ghost’s shirt askew; his pale hair straggled silkily over his bare, sweaty neck. Steve carried only a guitar case, the instrument inside padded with a spare shirt and a few extra pairs of socks.

They came to another dead end, then to the motionless hulk of an escalator with a chain strung across its railings. A KEEP OUT sign hung from the chain, swinging lazily as if someone had given it a push and then ducked out of sight just before Steve and Ghost came around the corner. Steve began to feel like a stupid hick, to feel like the place was playing tricks on them. *Came to the Big City and couldn't even find our way out of the bus station. We ought to sit down right here and wait for the next bus headed south, and when it comes, we ought to hop on it and go right back home. Fuck New York, fuck the big club date. I don't like it here either.*

But that was stupid. The city was out there somewhere, and it had to get better than this.

Port Authority, Ghost decided, was about the worst place he had ever been in. Everything about it looked wrong, smelled wrong, leaned wrong. There were patterns on the floor made by the grime of a thousand soles; there was a bloody handprint on the tile wall. Looking at it, Ghost tried to close off his mind: he didn't want to know how it had gotten there. He managed to block out all but a faint impression of dirty knuckles plowing into a soft toothless mouth.

All at once the corridors shook and shuddered. The floor vibrated beneath his feet, throwing Ghost off balance. He had no way of knowing that this loss of equilibrium was caused by the subways constantly passing through; it made him feel as if the place were trying to digest him.

How did you ever get here? he thought. *How did you get from the green mountains, from the kudzu traintracks and the lazy hot summers, all the way to this city that could chew you up and spit you out like a wad of gum that's lost its flavor? How did you get to this place where you can never belong?*

Immersed in his thoughts, he had let Steve get a little ahead of him. He looked up an instant before the apparition of death reeled around the corner; he heard Steve's curse, the sharp "Fuck!" that was nearly a gag, as the apparition lurched into Steve.

Steve's arms shot out reflexively, found the man's shoulders and shoved him away. The bum fell back against the wall, leaving a long wet smear on the tiles. His ragged suit jacket and the wattles of his throat were webbed with pale stringy vomit that dripped off his chin and made small foul splatters on the floor. His skin was gray, flaccid. It made Ghost think of a pumpkin that had sat too long in his grandmother's cellar once, waiting for Halloween; when he'd poked it, his finger had punched through the rind and sunk into the soft rotten meat. This man's skin looked as if it would rupture just as easily. One of his eyes was filmed over with a creamy yellowish cataract. The other eye listed toward the ceiling, watered and seemed about to spill over, then managed to track. When the eye met his, Ghost felt ice tingle along his spine. There was no one home behind that eye.

A wasted claw of a hand came up clutching a Styrofoam cup in which a few coins rattled. Veins stood out on the back of the hand. In the dead light they were as stark and clear as a map of the man's ruined soul. "Spare change for my li'l girl," he muttered. His voice caught in his throat, then dragged itself out slow as a bad recording. "My li'l girl's sick. Gotta catch the mornin' bus to Jersey."

Ghost looked at Steve. The understanding passed clearly between them: *bullshit*. There was no little girl in Jersey, there was nothing waiting for this man except the love at the bottom of a bottle. But the reality of him staggering through the desolate corridors in his vomit-caked coat, with his lone empty eye—that was worse than any sob story. Steve pulled out his wallet; Ghost dug through the pockets of his army jacket. They came up with a dollar each and stuffed the bills into the broken Styrofoam cup.

The bum threw his head back and a weird hooting sound came from his cracked lips. It was not quite a word, not quite a whistle. It reverberated off the tiles and ceilings.

And then the walls and the corridors of the Port Authority seemed to split wide open, and the legions of the hopeless spilled forth.

The bums were everywhere at once, coming from every direction, their eyes fixed on Steve's wallet and Ghost's open hands and the crisp bills poking out of the cup. Most of them had their own jingling cups; they shoved them at Steve, at Ghost, and their eyes implored. Their voices rose in a hundred meaningless pleas: *cuppa coffee ... sick baby ... hungry, mister, I'm hungry*. In the end the voices only meant one thing. *Give me. You who have, when I have none—give me.*

They kept coming. There seemed to be no end to them. Their hands reached for the money and grasped it. A persistent young brother grabbed a handful of Steve's hair and wouldn't let go until Steve reared back and punched him full in the face. He got a fistful of snot and ropy saliva for his trouble. As the boy fell away, Steve saw angry red holes in the pale flesh of his outstretched palms: needle marks. *He was my age*, Steve thought wildly; something in the eyes made him think the kid might have been even younger than twenty-four. *But he was already worn out enough to shoot up in the palms of his hands.*

Steve found himself flashing on *Dawn of the Dead*, a movie that had terrified him when he was a kid. He'd seen it again a couple of years ago and been surprised by how funny it really was: Romero's allegory of zombies roaming a modern mega-mall had escaped him at twelve. But now the original kid-terror flooded back. This was how it would be when the zombies ate you. They weren't very smart or quick, but there were a *lot* of them, and they would just keep coming and coming until you couldn't fight them any more.

Filth-caked nails scraped his flesh. The wallet was torn out of his grasp and dumped on the floor. Steve saw dirty hands shuffling through the trivia of his life. His driver's license. Ticket stubs from concerts he'd seen. A tattered review of Lost Souls?, his and Ghost's band, that had been written up in a Raleigh newspaper. Rage exploded like a crimson rocket in his brain. He had *worked* to get that money; he had *worked* to have a life, not see it trickle away from him like vomit on a dirty bus-station floor.

He hefted the guitar case—none of them seemed interested in that—and swung it in a wild arc. It connected with flesh, filthy hair, bone. Steve winced as he heard the jangling protest of the strings. He'd hit the first bum in his vomit-caked jacket, the only one they had willingly given money. *Try that for a handout, motherfucker.* The bum fell to his knees, clutching the back of his skull. Even the blood welling up between his fingers had an unhealthy look, like the watery blood at the bottom of a meat tray. It splattered the dirty floor in large uneven drops.

Ghost was grappling for his backpack. An old woman with skin like spoiled hamburger pulled at one shoulderstrap. The buttons of her flannel shirt had popped open and her shrivelled breasts tumbled out. The nipples were long and leathery as the stems of mushrooms. Her hair was a uniform grayish-yellow mat overlaid with a layer of white gauze which seemed to thicken, to form dense little balls, in several spots. Networks of delicate threads led away from these; dark shapes moved sluggishly within them. *Cocoons*, Steve realized sickly. *She has cocoons in her hair.*

He grabbed the woman by the shoulders and moved her away. Ghost's notebooks were in that backpack—the lyrics to every song they had written. Ghost's eyes met Steve's, pale blue gone darker with panic.

Then, for no discernible reason, the creeps began to lift their heads and scent the air. A silent alarm seemed to pass among them. One by one they shrank away, sidled along the walls and disappeared like wraiths into the maze of corridors. The money in their Styrofoam cups rustled and jingled. Steve thought of cockroaches scuttling for cover when the kitchen light snaps on. In less than a minute they were all gone.

Steve and Ghost stared at each other, sweating, catching their breaths. Ghost held up a shaky hand. The cocoon lady's nails had left a long, shallow scratch along the back of it, from his knuckles to the bony knob of his wrist. A moment later they heard heavy, measured footsteps approaching. They edged closer together but did

not otherwise react; this was surely the soul of the city itself coming to claim them.

The cop came around the corner all hard-edged and polished and gleaming, stopped at the sight of them, saw Steve's wallet and its contents scattered on the floor, frowned. His face was broad, Italian-looking, freshly shaved but the beard beneath the skin already showing faintly blue-black. "Help you with something?" he asked, his voice sharp with suspicion.

Steve drew in a long trembling breath and Ghost spoke quickly, before Steve could. Cussing cops was never a good idea, no matter where you were. "I think we got a little lost," he said. "Could you tell us how to get out of here?"

He was relieved when the cop pointed them in the right direction and Steve bent and scooped up his wallet, then stalked off without a word. Ghost's brain still ached from the long bus ride and the attack of the homeless people—or the people who lived, perhaps, in Port Authority. Worse than their grasping hands had been the touch of their minds upon his, as many-legged and hungry as mosquitoes. Their raw pain, the stink of their dead dreams. On top of that he hadn't needed Steve to get himself arrested. But Ghost was used to being the occasional peacemaker between Steve and almost everyone they knew. Steve bristled and Ghost calmed; that was just the way things were.

The sky was already brightening when they came out of the bus terminal. The city soared around them, bathed in a clear lavender light. The first building Ghost saw was an old stone church; the second was a four-story sex emporium, its neon shimmering pale pink in the dawn. Steve leaned back against the glass doors and began to laugh.

"Good morning, Hell's Kitchen," he said.

Washington Square Park was in full regalia, though it was still early afternoon.

There were street musicians of every stripe, rappers clicking fast fingers and rattling heavy gold chains, old hippies with battered guitars and homemade pan pipes and permanent stoned smirks, young hippies singing solemn folk lyrics *acapella*, even a Dixieland brass band near the great stone arch. There was the savory mustard-chili tang of hot dogs, the harsh smoulder of city exhaust, the woodsy smell of ganja burning. There were homeboys and Rasta men and hairy-chested drag queens, slumming yuppies and street freaks. There were the folks for whom every day was Halloween, faces painted pale, lips slashed crimson or black, ears and wrists decorated with silver crucifixes, skulls, charms of death and hoodoo. They huddled into their dark clothes, plucked at their dyed, teased, tortured hair, cut their black-rimmed eyes at passersby. There were punks in leather; there were drug dealers chanting the charms of their wares (*clean crystal ... sweetest smoke in the city ... goooooood ice, goooooood blow*). There were cops on the beat, cops looking the other way.

And, of course, there were two white boys from North Carolina whose feet had just this morning touched New York City asphalt for the first time.

They had drunk vile coffee from a stand in Times Square, then walked around for a while. They kept losing track of the Empire State Building, which was the only landmark they recognized. The tranquil light of early morning soon gave way to the hustle and shove of the day. The air came alive with shouts, blaring horns, the constant low thrum of the city-machine.

Eventually—as soon as they could stand to go below street level again—they descended into the subway at Penn Station and didn't get out again until the Washington Square stop. At that point Ghost swore he would never enter a transit station or board any subway in New York City or anywhere else, ever again. It wasn't the crowds; since Port Authority the only panhandlers they'd seen had been shaking discreet cups or quietly noodling on saxophones. No one else had bothered them. It was the merciless white light in the stations and the bleak garbage-strewn deadliness of the tracks and

the great clattering ratcheting roar of the trains. It was hurtling through sections of tunnel where the tracks split in two at the last heart-stopping second before you smashed into solid stone. It was the abandoned tunnels that split off like dead universes. The very idea of the trains worming along beneath the city, in their honeycombed burrows, seemed horribly organic.

But topside, he was fine. Ghost found himself liking the stew of sounds and smells that comprised the city, and the colorful variety of the minds that brushed his, and the carnival of Washington Square. Steve stopped to watch the Dixieland band, and Ghost listened to the dipping, soaring brass for several minutes too.

But in his peripheral vision a man was rooting in a garbage can. He tried not to look, but couldn't help himself as the man pulled out a whole dripping chilidog, brushed flies away, and bit into it.

The man was old and white, with long gray dreadlocks and mummified hands and the universal costume of the drifter, army jacket, baggy pants, Salvation Army shirt that just missed being a rag: an ensemble ready to fade into the background at a moment's notice. The chilidog was a carnage of ketchup and pickle relish and flaccid meat, the bun limp, sponge-soggy. The man's face registered more pleasure than distaste. The 'dog might taste awful, but there was still warm sun on his shoulders and a half-full bottle in his pocket and a goddamn huge party going on right here, right now. His eyes were curiously clear, almost childlike.

But it was garbage, he was eating garbage. The wire trashcan was crammed with ripening refuse. A redolent juice seeped out at the bottom, a distillation of every disgusting fluid in the can, moonshine for bluebottle flies. Ghost felt his mind stretching, trying to accommodate something he had never had to think closely about before. There were poor people in Missing Mile, sure. Most of the old men who played checkers outside the Farmers Hardware store were on some kind of government or military pension. Lots of people got food stamps. But were there people eating out of garbage cans? Were there people so desperate that they would band together and attack you for the change in your pocket?

You bet there are. They're everywhere. Your life has been just sheltered enough, just sanitized enough, that you didn't see them. But you can't get away from it here ... this city chews up its young and spits them back in your face.

Ghost looked up, startled. He wasn't sure what had just happened; it felt as if the world, for an instant, had split and then reconverged. As if someone had had the exact same thought as him, at the exact same time.

He saw a young black man leaning on the low concrete wall nearby, also watching the old drifter. The young man was handsome, trendily barbered, dressed in casual but expensive-looking sport clothes. He wore gold-rimmed glasses with little round lenses, carried a radio Walkman in his breast pocket and a copy of *Spy* tucked under his arm. In his face as he watched the old man chewing was an ineffable sadness, not quite sympathy, not quite pity.

The hearts that would swell with rage back home—if you could call them hearts—to see a black man looking upon a white man with anything resembling pity ...

(Get outta that garbage, boy)

The man shifted on the wall and looked straight at Ghost, warm mocha eyes meeting startled pale blue. And suddenly Ghost knew many things about this man. He was from a tiny town in south Georgia—Ghost didn't get the name—and his family had been crushingly poor. Not trash-eating poor ... but there had been a man in the town who was. Ancient and alone, black as midnight, brains pickled by half a century of rotgut wine. He was no town hobo of the sort people laughed at but looked out for; he had no colorful nickname, no family, no history. He was a smelly old wino who pissed his pants, and most of the whites in town, if they were aware of him at all, called him Hey Boy. As in *Hey, Boy, get outta that garbage*. As in *Hey, Boy, I'm talkin' to you*. As in *Hey, Boy, get off my property before I blow your nigger guts to Hell*.

And this young man, as a hungry scrawny child in this stagnant backwater of a town, had seen that happen.

Ghost saw the blood exploding through the air, smelled flame and cordite, redneck sweat and the raw sewage odor of Hey Boy's ruptured, blasted guts. He felt the giddy terror of a child hiding—where?—he couldn't get it—viewing death up close for the first time, afraid its twin black barrels would swing his way next. He could not move, could not look away from the young man's calm brown eyes, until Steve touched his shoulder. "Somebody just gave me directions to the club. It's real near here. You want to go check it out?"

Ghost glanced back over his shoulder as they left the park. The young man was no longer looking at him, and Ghost felt no urge to speak. They had already had the most intimate contact possible; of what use were words?

They crossed a wide traffic-filled avenue and turned east. Ghost wasn't sure just where the Village began, but the streets seemed to be getting narrower, the window displays more fabulous, the crowds decidedly funkier. People wore silver studs in their noses, delicate hoops through their lips and eyebrows. A boy in a black fishnet shirt had both nipples pierced, with a filigree chain connecting the rings. There were shaved and painted scalps, long snaky braids, leather jackets jangling with zippers and buckles, flowing hippie dresses of gossamer and gauze. The streets of the East Village by day seemed a shrine to mutant fashion.

Steve pulled a joint from his sock, lit up, took a deep drag and passed it to Ghost. Ghost grabbed the burning cigarette and cupped it gingerly between his palms, trying to hide it, expecting a big cop hand to fall on his shoulder at any second. "Are you *crazy*?"

Steve shook his head, then blew out a giant plume of smoke. "It's cool. Terry said you could smoke right on the street up here, as long as you're discreet. He gave me this as a going-away present."

Terry owned the record store where Steve worked, and was the best-travelled and most worldly of their crowd; also the biggest

stoner, so he ought to know. But Ghost could not stretch his definition of *discreet* to include walking down one of the busiest streets in New York City with a cloud of pot smoke trailing behind. Still ... He looked thoughtfully at the joint in his hand, then brought it up to his lips and took a cautious toke. The spicy green flavor filled his throat, swirled through his lungs and his brain. New York probably imported every exotic strain of reefer from every country in the world, but Southern homegrown had to beat them all.

A few blocks later the crowds thinned out. The streets here felt older, grayer, somehow more soothing. More like a place where you could actually live. There were little groceries on every block with wooden stands of flowers and produce in front. Ghost smelled ginger and ripe tomatoes, the subtle cool scent of ice, the tang of fresh greens and herbs. Sage, basil, onions, thyme, sweet rosemary and soapy-smelling coriander. As long as he could smell herbs he was happy.

New York, Steve decided, was a city bent upon providing its citizens with plenty of food and information. In other parts of the city there had been hot dog carts everywhere, pizza parlors and cappuccino shops, restaurants serving food from Thailand, Mongolia, Latino-China, and everywhere else in the world; newsstands on every corner carried hundreds of papers, magazines, and often a wide selection of hardcore porn. There were radios and TVs blaring, headlines shrieking. In the first part of the Village Steve had seen more restaurants, comics shops, and several intriguing bookstores he planned to check out later. Here you had the little groceries, though not quite so many restaurants. For information, there were the street vendors.

Steve had started noticing them a while back, though he'd been too busy noticing everything else to pay much attention at first. But here they were more frequent and less obscured by the flow of the crowd. They set up tables or spread out army blankets, then arranged the stuff they wanted to sell and sat down to wait until somebody bought it. There were tables of ratty paperbacks, boxes of old magazines, tie-dyed T-shirts and ugly nylon butt-packs, cheap

watches and household appliances laid out on the sidewalk like the leftovers from somebody's yard sale.

But as they walked farther, the wares started to get a little strange. At first it was just stuff that no one could possibly want, like a box of broken crayon-ends or a shampoo bottle filled with sand. Then they passed a man selling what looked like medical equipment: bedpans in a dusty row, unidentifiable tubes and pouches, some jar-shaped humps covered with a tattered army blanket. In the center of his display was a single artificial leg that had once been painted a fleshy pink. Now the paint was chipped, the limb's surface webbed with a thousand tiny, grimy cracks. The toeless foot was flat and squared-off, little more than a block of wood. At the top was a nightmarish jumble of straps and braces meant, Steve supposed, to hold the leg onto a body. He could not imagine walking around on such a thing every day.

"Where is this club?" Ghost asked nervously.

"Well ... I know we're near it." Steve stopped at the corner, shoved sweaty hair out of his face, and looked around hoping the place would appear. "The guy who gave me directions said it would be hard to find in the daytime. We're supposed to look for an unlit neon sign that says *Beware*."

"Great."

"WHAT PLACE YEZ LOOKIN' FOR?" boomed a voice behind them. It took Steve several seconds to realize that the vendor had spoken and was now motioning them over.

"Yez look like gentlemen in search of the unusual," the vendor told them before they could say anything about clubs or directions. He was a white man of indeterminate age, dishwater-brown hair thin on top but straggling halfway down his back in an untidy braid. His eyes were hidden behind black wraparound shades, his grin as sharp and sudden as a razor. Steve noticed a strange ring on the second finger of the guy's right hand: a bird skull cast in silver, some species with huge hollow eyesockets and a long, tapering, lethal-looking beak that jutted out over the knuckle. It was lovely,

but it also looked like a good tool for putting an eye out or ventilating a throat.

“Well, right now we’re looking for this club—”

“Something UNUSUAL,” the vendor overrode. “A collector’s item maybe.” His hand hovered over his wares, straightened tubes and straps, caressed the artificial leg. “Something yez don’t see every day.” His face went immobile, then split back into that sharp crazy grin. “Or rather—something yez DO see every day, but most of the time yez can’t take the fuckers HOME WITH YA!”

His hand twitched back the army blanket covering the jar-shaped humps. A small cloud of dust rose into the air. Sunlight winked on polished glass. Steve cursed, took two steps back, then came forward again and bent to look.

Ghost, who had never in his life felt so far from home, burst into tears.

The man had six big glass jars arranged in two neat rows, sealed at the tops and filled with what could only be formaldehyde. Inside each jar, suspended in the murky liquid, was a large, pale, bloated shape: an undeniably real human head.

The necks appeared to have been surgically severed. Ghost could see layers of tissue within the stumps as precisely delineated as the circles of wood inside a tree trunk. One head was tilted far enough to the side to show a neat peg of bone poking from the meat of the neck. Several had shaved scalps; one had dark hair that floated and trailed like seaweed. Parts of faces were pressed flat against the glass: an ear, a swollen nostril, a rubbery lip pulled askew. Blood-suffused eyeballs protruded from their sockets like pickled hard-boiled eggs.

“How much do you want for them?” Steve asked. Ghost sobbed harder.

The grin seemed to throw off light, it was so wide and dazzling. “Two apiece. Ten for all six of ’em.”

“Ten *dollars*?”

“Hey, I’m in a hurry, I gotta unload these puppies today, yez think this is *legal* or somethin’?”

As if on cue, sirens rose out of the general distant cacophony, approaching fast. A pair of police cars rounded the corner and came shrieking up the block. Revolving blue light flickered across the lenses of the black wraparound shades. The grin disappeared. Without even a *good day to yez* the vendor scooped up the artificial leg and took off down the street. One car roared after him. The other slammed to a halt at the curb where Steve and Ghost still stood staring stupidly at the heads.

“You weren’t really going to buy one, were you?” Ghost whispered.

“Course not.” Steve snorted. “I don’t have any money anyway, remember? The bums got it all. I’m lucky to have an I.D. to show this cop.” He dug out his wallet and flipped it open. “We’re just a couple of hicks from North Carolina, Officer. We lay no claim to these jars or their contents.”

Minds like butterflies preserved in brine, trapped under thick glass ...

It seemed that their friendly vendor, a gentleman whose given name was Robyn Moorhead but who was known variously as Robyn Hood, Moorhead Robbins, and (aptly enough) “More Head,” had robbed a medical transport truck en route from Beth Israel Hospital to the Mütter Medical Museum in Philadelphia while it was stopped at a gas station. The truck’s door had not latched properly, and More Head and an unidentified girlfriend had simply climbed in and cleaned it out. He had already sold several items before Steve and Ghost came along. The artificial leg, though, was his own. He used it for display purposes only, to call attention to whatever shady wares he sold; it was a valuable antique and not for sale; he carried it everywhere.

No, Ghost told himself. You did not feel their minds beating against the jars like dying insects. You did not feel the raw burn of formaldehyde against your eyeballs, the dead taste of it in your mouth; you did not feel

the subtle breakdown of the molecular dream that was your brain. They were not alive. You could not feel them.

“I gotta know,” said the cop as he finished writing up their statement. “How much did he want for ‘em?” Steve told him, and the cop shrugged, then sighed. He was a decent sort and the affair seemed to have put him in a philosophical mood. “Man, even’f I was a crook, even’f I was tryna sell yuman heads, I’d’t least be askin’ more’n ten bucks. Kinda devalues the sanctity a’yuman life, y’know?”

Jewelled wings, beating themselves to powder against thick glass ...

They had overshot the club by five blocks. The cops pointed them in the right direction and ten minutes later they were descending below street level again, past the unlit neon sign that said not *Beware* but *Be Aware*, though Ghost guessed it amounted to the same thing, and into the club. The poster they had sent was plastered everywhere: TONIGHT—LOST SOULS? They were too tired to consider doing a soundcheck yet, but it was just the two of them, Steve’s guitar and Ghost’s voice, and they didn’t really need one. At any rate they wouldn’t be going on till midnight. Right now they needed sleep. One of the bartenders was out of town and had left them the keys to her apartment, which was just upstairs.

Too tired for the stairs, they rode the ancient, terrifying elevator up seven stories. Steve had bummed two beers at the bar. He guzzled most of one as they rode up. “New York is pretty interesting,” he said.

“No shit.”

Steve snorted into his beer. And then at once they were both laughing, losing it in a rickety box suspended from an antique cable in a building that was taller than any building in Missing Mile but small by the standards of this magical, morbid, million-storied city. They fell against each other and howled and slapped high-five. They were young and the one had a voice like gravelly gold and the other

could play guitar with a diamond-hard edge born of sex and voodoo and despair, and it was all part of the Great Adventure.

They staggered out at the top still giggling, fumbled with three unfamiliar locks, and let themselves into the apartment. The place was decorated all in black: black walls, black lace dripping from the ceiling, black paint over the windows, black silk sheets on a huge futon that covered the floor. The effect was soothing, like being cradled in the womb of night. Their laughter wound down.

Steve stood his guitar case in a corner, gulped the second beer after Ghost refused it, and stretched his tired bones out on the futon. Ghost toed his sneakers off and lay down beside him. It was absolutely dark and, for the first time since Port Authority, nearly quiet. How strange to think that the whole teeming city was still out there, just beyond the walls of the building. Suddenly Ghost felt disoriented in the little pocket of blackness, as if the compass he always carried in his head had deserted him. He shifted on the mattress so that his shoulder touched Steve's arm, so that he could feel Steve's familiar warmth all along the left side of his body. Steve heaved a great deep sigh like a sleeping hound. Ghost thought of all the highways, all the back roads, all the train tracks and green paths that led back home, and he did not feel so far away.

And there was music, there was always music to carry him wherever he wanted to go. Soon the distant thrum of the city and the tales it wanted to tell him faded completely, and the gouge of Steve's bony elbow in his side lulled him to sleep.

1992

Calcutta, Lord of Nerves

I was born in a north Calcutta hospital in the heart of an Indian midnight just before the beginning of the monsoon season. The air hung heavy as wet velvet over the Hooghly River, offshoot of the holy Ganga, and the stumps of banyan trees on the Upper Chitpur Road were flecked with dots of phosphorus like the ghosts of flames. I was as dark as the new moon in the sky, and I cried very little. I feel as if I remember this, because this is the way it must have been.

My mother died in labor, and later that night the hospital burned to the ground. (I have no reason to connect the two incidents; then again, I have no reason not to. Perhaps a desire to live burned on in my mother's heart. Perhaps the flames were fanned by her hatred for me, the insignificant mewling infant that had killed her.) A nurse carried me out of the roaring husk of the building and laid me in my father's arms. He cradled me, numb with grief.

My father was American. He had come to Calcutta five years earlier, on business. There he had fallen in love with my mother and, like a man who will not pluck a flower from its garden, he could not bear to see her removed from the hot, lush, squalid city that had spawned her. It was part of her exotica. So my father stayed in Calcutta. Now his flower was gone. He pressed his thin chapped lips to the satin of my hair. I remember opening my eyes—they felt tight and shiny, parched by the flames—and looking up at the column of smoke that roiled into the sky, a night sky blasted cloudy pink like a sky full of blood and milk.

There would be no milk for me, only chemical-tasting drops of formula from a plastic nipple. The morgue was in the basement of the hospital and did not burn. My mother lay on a metal table, a hospital gown stiff with her dying sweat pulled up over her red-

smearred crotch and thighs. Her eyes stared up through the blackened skeleton of the hospital, up to the milky bloody sky, and ash filtered down to mask her pupils.

My father and I left for America before the monsoon came. Without my mother Calcutta was a pestilential hellhole, a vast cremation grounds, or so my father thought. In America he could send me to school and movies, ball games and Boy Scouts, secure in the knowledge that someone else would take care of me or I would take care of myself. There were no *thuggees* to rob me and cut my throat, no *goondas* who would snatch me and sell my bones for fertilizer. There were no cows to infect the streets with their steaming sacred piss. My father could give me over to the comparative wholesomeness of American life, leaving himself free to sit in his darkened bedroom and drink whiskey until his long sensitive nose floated hazily in front of his face and the sabre edge of his grief began to dull. He was the sort of man who has only one love in his lifetime, and knows with the sick fervor of a fatalist that this love will be taken from him someday, and is hardly surprised when it happens.

When he was drunk he would talk about Calcutta. My little American mind rejected the place—I was in love with air conditioning, hamburgers and pizza, the free and indiscriminating love that was lavished upon me every time I twisted the TV dial—but somewhere in my Indian heart I longed for it. When I turned eighteen and my father finally failed to wake up from one of his drunken stupors, I returned to the city of my bloody birth as soon as I had the plane fare in my hand.

Calcutta, you will say. What a place to have been when the dead began to walk.

And I reply, what better place to be? What better place than a city where five million people look as if they are already dead—might as well be dead—and another five million wish they were?

I have a friend named Devi, a prostitute who began her work at the age of fifteen from a tarpaper shack on Sudder Street. Sudder is

the Bourbon Street of Calcutta, but there is far less of the carnival there, and no one wears a mask on Sudder Street because disguises are useless when shame is irrelevant. Devi works the big hotels now, selling American tourists or British expatriates or German businessmen a taste of exotic Bengal spice. She is gaunt and beautiful and hard as nails. Devi says the world is a whore, too, and Calcutta is the pussy of the world. The world squats and spreads its legs, and Calcutta is the dank sex you see revealed there, wet and fragrant with a thousand odors both delicious and foul. A source of lushest pleasure, a breeding ground for every conceivable disease.

The pussy of the world. It is all right with me. I like pussy, and I love my squalid city.

The dead like pussy too. If they are able to catch a woman and disable her enough so that she cannot resist, you will see the lucky ones burrowing in between her legs as happily as the most avid lover. They do not have to come up for air. I have seen the meat all the way up into the body cavity. The internal female organs seem to be a great delicacy, and why not? They are the caviar of the human body. It is a sobering thing to come across a woman sprawled in the gutter with her intestines sliding from the shredded ruin of her womb, but you do not react. You do not distract the dead from their repast. They are slow and stupid, but that is all the more reason for you to be smart and quick and quiet. They will do the same thing to a man—chew off the soft penis and scrotal sac like choice morsels of squid, leaving only a red raw hole. But you can sidle by while they are feeding and they will not notice you. I do not try to hide from them. I walk the streets and look; that is all I do anymore. I am fascinated. This is not horror, this is simply more of Calcutta.

First I would sleep late, through the sultry morning into the heat of the afternoon. I had a room in one of the decrepit marble palaces of the old city. Devi visited me here often, but on a typical morning I woke alone, clad only in twisted bedsheets and a luxurious patina of sweat. Sun came through the window and fell in bright bars across the floor. I felt safe in my second-story room as long as I kept the door locked. The dead were seldom able to navigate stairs, and

they could not manage the sustained cooperative effort to break down a locked door. They were no threat to me. They fed upon those who had given up, those too traumatized to keep running: the senile, abandoned old, the catatonic young women who sat in gutters cradling babies that had died during the night. These were easy prey.

The walls of my room were painted a bright coral and the sills and door were aqua. The colors caught the sun and made the day seem cheerful despite the heat that shimmered outside. I went downstairs, crossed the empty courtyard with its dry marble fountain, and went out into the street. This area was barren in the heat, painfully bright, with parched weeds lining the road and an occasional smear of cow dung decorating the gutter. By nightfall both weeds and dung might be gone. Children collected cow shit and patted it into cakes held together with straw, which could be sold as fuel for cooking fires.

I headed toward Chowringhee Road, the broad main thoroughfare of the city. Halfway up my street, hunched under the awning of a mattress factory, I saw one of the catatonic young mothers. The dead had found her too. They had already taken the baby from her arms and eaten though the soft part at the top of the skull. Vacuous bloody faces rose and dipped. Curds of tender brain fell from slack mouths. The mother sat on the curb nearby, her arms cradling nothing. She wore a filthy green sari that was ripped across the chest. The woman's breasts protruded heavily, swollen-with milk. When the dead finished with her baby they would start on her, and she would make no resistance. I had seen it before. I knew how the milk would spurt and then gush as they tore into her breasts. I knew how hungrily they would lap up the twin rivers of blood and milk.

Above their bobbing heads, the tin awning dripped long ropy strands of cotton. Cotton hung from the roof in dirty clumps, caught in the corners of the doorway like spiderweb. Someone's radio blared faintly in another part of the building, tuned to an English-language Christian broadcast. A gospel hymn assured Calcutta that its dead in Christ would rise. I moved on toward Chowringhee.

Most of the streets in the city are positively cluttered with buildings. Buildings are packed in cheek-by-jowl, helter-skelter, like books of different sizes jammed into a rickety bookcase. Buildings even sag over the street so that all you see overhead is a narrow strip of sky crisscrossed by miles of clotheslines. The flapping silks and cottons are very bright against the sodden, dirty sky. But there are certain vantage points where the city opens up and all at once you have a panoramic view of Calcutta. You see a long muddy hillside that has become home to a *bustee*, thousands and thousands of slum dwellings where tiny fires are tended through the night. The dead come often to these slums of tin and cardboard, but the people do not leave the *bustee*—where would they go? Or you see a wasteland of disused factories, empty warehouses, blackened smokestacks jutting into a rust-colored sky. Or a flash of the Hooghly River, steel-gray in its shroud of mist, spanned by the intricate girder-and-wirescape of the Howrah Bridge.

Just now I was walking opposite the river. The waterfront was not considered a safe place because of the danger from drowning victims. Thousands each year took the long plunge off the bridge, and thousands more simply waded into the water. It is easy to commit suicide at a riverfront because despair collects in the water vapor. This is part of the reason for the tangible cloud of despair that hangs over Calcutta along with its veil of humidity.

Now the suicides and the drowned street children were coming out of the river. At any moment the water might regurgitate one, and you would hear him scrabbling up the bank. If he had been in the water long enough he might tear himself to spongy gobbets on the stones and broken bricks that littered the waterfront; all that remained would be a trace of foul brown odor, like the smell of mud from the deep part of the river.

Police—especially the Sikhs, who are said to be more violent than Hindus—had been taking the dead up on the bridge to shoot them. Even from far away I could see spray-patterns of red on the drab girders. Alternately they set the dead alight with gasoline and threw them over the railing into the river. At night it was not uncommon

to see several writhing shapes caught in the downstream current, the fiery symmetry of their heads and arms and legs making them into five-pointed human stars.

I stopped at a spice vendor's stand to buy a bunch of red chrysanthemums and a handful of saffron. The saffron I had him wrap in a twist of scarlet silk. "It is a beautiful day," I said to him in Bengali. He stared at me, half amused, half appalled. "A beautiful day for what?" True Hindu faith calls upon the believer to view all things as equally sacred. There is nothing profane—no dirty dog picking through the ash bin at a cremation ground, no stinking gangrenous stump thrust into your face by a beggar who seems to hold you personally responsible for all his woes. These things are as sacred as feasting day at the holiest temple. But even for the most devout Hindus it has been difficult to see these walking dead as sacred. They are empty humans. That is the truly horrifying thing about them, more than their vacuous hunger for living flesh, more than the blood caked under their nails or the shreds of flesh caught between their teeth. They are soulless; there is nothing in their eyes; the sounds they make—their farts, their grunts and mewls of hunger—are purely reflexive. The Hindu, who has been taught to believe in the soul of everything, has a particular horror of these drained human vessels. But in Calcutta life goes on. The shops are still open. The confusion of traffic still inches its way up Chowringhee. No one sees any alternatives.

Soon I arrived at what was almost invariably my day's first stop. I would often walk twenty or thirty miles in a day—I had strong shoes and nothing to occupy my time except walking and looking. But I always began at the Kalighat, temple of the Goddess.

There are a million names for her, a million vivid descriptions: Kali the Terrible, Kali the Ferocious, skull-necklace, destroyer of men, eater of souls. But to me she was Mother Kali, the only one of the vast and colorful pantheon of Hindu gods that stirred my imagination and lifted my heart. She was the Destroyer, but all final refuge was found in her. She was the goddess of the age. She could bleed and burn and still rise again, very awake, beautifully terrible.

I ducked under the garlands of marigolds and strands of temple bells strung across the door, and I entered the temple of Kali. After the constant clamor of the street, the silence inside the temple was deafening. I fancied I could hear the small noises of my body echoing back to me from the ceiling far above. The sweet opium glaze of incense curled around my head. I approached the idol of Kali, the *jagrata*. Her gimlet eyes watched me as I came closer.

She was tall, gaunter and more brazenly naked than my friend Devi even at her best moments. Her breasts were tipped with blood—at least I always imagined them so—and her two sharp fangs and the long streamer of a tongue that uncurled from her open mouth were the color of blood too. Her hair whipped about her head and her eyes were wild, but the third crescent eye in the center of her forehead was merciful; it saw and accepted all.

The necklace of skulls circled the graceful stem of her neck, adorned the sculpted hollow of her throat. Her four arms were so sinuous that if you looked away even for an instant, they seemed to sway. In her four hands she held a noose of rope, a skull-staff, a shining sword, and a gaping, very dead-looking severed head. A silver bowl sat at the foot of the statue just beneath the head, where the blood from the neck would drip. Sometimes this was filled with goat's or sheep's blood as an offering. The bowl was full today. In these times the blood might well be human, though there was no putrid smell to indicate it had come from one of the dead.

I laid my chrysanthemums and saffron at Kali's feet. Among the other offerings, mostly sweets and bundles of spice, I saw a few strange objects. A fingerbone. A shrivelled mushroom of flesh that turned out upon closer inspection to be an ear. These were offerings for special protection, mostly wrested from the dead. But who was to say that a few devotees had not lopped off their own ears or finger joints to coax a boon from Kali? Sometimes when I had forgotten to bring an offering, I cut my wrist with a razor blade and let a few drops of my blood fall at the idol's feet.

I heard a shout from outside and turned my head for a moment. When I looked back, the four arms seemed to have woven

themselves into a new pattern, the long tongue seemed to loll farther from the scarlet mouth. And—this was a frequent fantasy of mine—the wide hips now seemed to tilt forward, affording me a glimpse of the sweet and terrible petalled cleft between the thighs of the goddess.

I smiled up at the lovely sly face. “If only I had a tongue as long as yours, Mother,” I murmured, “I would kneel before you and lick the folds of your holy pussy until you screamed with joy.” The toothy grin seemed to grow wider, more lascivious. I imagined much in the presence of Kali.

Outside in the temple yard I saw the source of the shout I had heard. There is a stone block upon which the animals brought to Kali, mostly baby goats, are beheaded by the priests. A gang of roughly dressed men had captured a dead girl and were bashing her head in on the sacrificial block. Their arms rose and fell, ropy muscles flexing. They clutched sharp stones and bits of brick in their scrawny hands. The girl’s half-pulped head still lashed back and forth. The lower jaw still snapped, though the teeth and bone were splintered. Foul thin blood coursed down and mingled with the rich animal blood in the earth beneath the block. The girl was nude, filthy with her own gore and waste. The flaccid breasts hung as if sucked dry of meat. The belly was burst open with gases. One of the men thrust a stick into the ruined gouge between the girl’s legs and leaned on it with all his weight.

Only in extensive stages of decay can the dead be told from the lepers. The dead are greater in number now, and even the lepers look human when compared to the dead. But that is only if you get close enough to look into the eyes. The faces in various stages of wet and dry rot, the raw ends of bones rubbing through skin like moldy cheesecloth, the cancerous domes of the skulls are the same. After a certain point lepers could no longer stay alive begging in the streets, for most people would now flee in terror at the sight of a rotting face. As a result the lepers were dying, then coming back, and the two races mingled like some obscene parody of incest. Perhaps they actually could breed. The dead could obviously eat and digest, and

seemed to excrete at random like everyone else in Calcutta, but I supposed no one knew whether they could ejaculate or conceive.

A stupid idea, really. A dead womb would rot to pieces around a fetus before it could come halfway to term; a dead scrotal sac would be far too cold a cradle for living seed. But no one seemed to know anything about the biology of the dead. The newspapers were hysterical, printing picture upon picture of random slaughter by dead and living alike. Radio stations had either gone off the air or were broadcasting endless religious exhortations that ran together in one long keening whine, the edges of Muslim, Hindu, Christian doctrine beginning to fray and blur.

No one in India could say for sure what made the dead walk. The latest theory I had heard was something about a genetically engineered microbe that had been designed to feed on plastic: a microbe that would save the world from its own waste. But the microbe had mutated and was now eating and “replicating” human cells, causing basic bodily functions to reactivate. It did not much matter whether this was true. Calcutta was a city relatively unsurprised to see its dead rise and walk and feed upon it. It had seen them doing so for a hundred years.

All the rest of the lengthening day I walked through the city. I saw no more dead except a cluster far away at the end of a blocked street, in the last rags of bloody light, fighting each other over the bloated carcass of a sacred cow.

My favorite place at sunset is by the river where I can see the Howrah Bridge. The Hooghly is painfully beautiful in the light of the setting sun. The last rays melt onto the water like hot *ghee*, turning the river from steel to khaki to nearly golden, a blazing ribbon of light. The bridge rises black and skeletal into the fading orange sky. Tonight an occasional skirl of bright flowers and still-glowing greasy embers floated by, the last earthly traces of bodies cremated farther up the river. Above the bridge were the burning *ghats* where families lined up to incinerate their dead and cast the ashes into the holy river. Cremation is done more efficiently these days, or at least more hurriedly. People can reconcile in their hearts

their fear of strangers' dead, but they do not want to see their own dead rise. I walked along the river for a while. The wind off the water carried the scent of burning meat. When I was well away from the bridge, I wandered back into the maze of narrow streets and alleyways that lead toward the docks in the far southern end of the city. People were already beginning to settle in for the night, though here a bedroom might mean your own packing crate or your own square of sidewalk. Fires glowed in nooks and corners.

A warm breeze still blew off the river and sighed its way through the winding streets. It seemed very late now. As I made my way from corner to corner, through intermittent pools of light and much longer patches of darkness, I heard small bells jingling to the rhythm of my footsteps. The brass bells of rickshaw men, ringing to tell me they were there in case I wished for a ride. But I could see none of the men. The effect was eerie, as if I were walking alone down an empty nighttime street being serenaded by ghostly bells. The feeling soon passed. You are never truly alone in Calcutta.

A thin hand slid out of the darkness as I passed. Looking into the doorway it came from, I could barely make out five gaunt faces, five forms huddled against the night. I dropped several coins into the hand and it slid out of sight again. I am seldom begged from. I look neither rich nor poor, but I have a talent for making myself all but invisible. People look past me, sometimes right through me. I don't mind; I see more things that way. But when I am begged from I always give. With my handful of coins, all five of them might have a bowl of rice and lentils tomorrow.

A bowl of rice and lentils in the morning, a drink of water from a broken standpipe at night.

It seemed to me that the dead were among the best-fed citizens of Calcutta.

Now I crossed a series of narrow streets and was surprised to find myself coming up behind the Kalighat. The side streets are so haphazardly arranged that you are constantly finding yourself in places you had no idea you were even near. I had been to the

Kalighat hundreds of times, but I had never approached it from this direction. The temple was dark and still. I had not been here at this hour before, did not even know whether the priests were still here or if one could enter so late. But as I walked closer I saw a little door standing open at the back. The entrance used by the priests, perhaps. Something flickered from within: a candle, a tiny mirror sewn on a robe, the smoldering end of a stick of incense.

I slipped around the side of the temple and stood at the door for a moment. A flight of stone steps led up into the darkness of the temple. The Kalighat at night, deserted, might have been an unpleasant prospect to some. The thought of facing the fierce idol alone in the gloom might have made some turn away from those steps. I began to climb them.

The smell reached me before I ascended halfway. To spend a day walking through Calcutta is to be assailed by thousands of odors both pleasant and foul: the savor of spices frying in *ghee*, the stink of shit and urine and garbage, the sick-sweet scent of the little white flowers called *mogra* that are sold in garlands and that make me think of the gardenia perfume American undertakers use to mask the smell of their corpses.

Almost everyone in Calcutta is scrupulously clean in person, even the very poor. They will leave their trash and their spit everywhere, but many of them wash their bodies twice a day. Still, everyone sweats under the sodden veil of heat, and at midday any public place will be redolent with the smell of human perspiration, a delicate tang like the mingled juices of lemons and onions. But lingering in the stairwell was an odor stronger and more foul than any I had encountered today. It was deep and brown and moist; it curled at the edges like a mushroom beginning to dry. It was the perfume of mortal corruption. It was the smell of rotting flesh.

Then I came up into the temple, and I saw them.

The large central room was lit only with candles that flickered in a restless draft, first this way, then that. In the dimness the worshippers looked no different from any other supplicants at the

feet of Kali. But as my eyes grew accustomed to the candlelight, details resolved themselves. The withered hands, the ruined faces. The burst body cavities where ropy organs could be seen trailing down behind the cagework of ribs.

The offerings they had brought.

By day Kali grinned down upon an array of blossoms and sweetmeats lovingly arranged at the foot of her pedestal. The array spread there now seemed more suited to the goddess. I saw human heads balanced on raw stumps of necks, eyes turned up to crescents of silver-white. I saw gobbets of meat that might have been torn from a belly or a thigh. I saw severed hands like pale lotus flowers, the fingers like petals opening silently in the night.

Most of all, piled on every side of the altar, I saw bones. Bones picked so clean that they gleamed in the candlelight. Bones with smears of meat and long snotty runners of fat still attached. Skinny arm-bones, clubby leg-bones, the pretzel of a pelvis, the beadwork of a spine. The delicate bones of children. The crumbling ivory bones of the old. The bones of those who could not run.

These things the dead brought to their goddess. She had been their goddess all along, and they her acolytes.

Kali's smile was hungrier than ever. The tongue lolled like a wet red streamer from the open mouth. The eyes were blazing black holes in the gaunt and terrible face. If she had stepped down from her pedestal and approached me now, if she had reached for me with those sinuous arms, I might not have been able to fall to my knees before her. I might have run. There are beauties too terrible to be borne.

Slowly the dead began to turn toward me. Their faces lifted and the rotting cavities of their nostrils caught my scent. Their eyes shone iridescent. Faint starry light shimmered in the empty spaces of their bodies. They were like cutouts in the fabric of reality, like conduits to a blank universe. The void where Kali ruled and the only comfort was in death.

They did not approach me. They stood holding their precious offerings and they looked at me—those of them that still had eyes—or they looked through me. At that moment I felt more than invisible. I felt empty enough to belong among these human shells.

A ripple seemed to pass through them. Then—in the uncertain candlelight, in the light that shimmered from the bodies of the dead—Kali did move.

The twitch of a finger, the deft turn of a wrist—at first it was so slight as to be nearly imperceptible. But then her lips split into an impossibly wide, toothy grin and the tip of her long tongue curled. She rotated her hips and swung her left leg high into the air. The foot that had trod on millions of corpses made a *pointe* as delicate as a prima ballerina's. The movement spread her sex wide open.

But it was not the petalled mandala-like cleft I had imagined kissing earlier. The pussy of the goddess was an enormous deep red hole that seemed to lead down to the center of the world. It was a gash in the universe, it was rimmed in blood and ash. Two of her four hands beckoned toward it, inviting me in. I could have thrust my head into it, then my shoulders, I could have crawled all the way into that wet crimson eternity, and kept crawling forever.

Then I did run. Before I had even decided to flee I found myself falling down the stone staircase, cracking my head and my knee on the risers. At the bottom I was up and running before I could register the pain. I told myself that I thought the dead would come after me. I do not know what I truly feared was at my back. At times I thought I was running not away from something, but toward it.

I ran all night. When my legs grew too tired to carry me I would board a bus. Once I crossed the bridge and found myself in Howrah, the even poorer suburb on the other side of the Hooghly. I stumbled through desolate streets for an hour or more before doubling back and crossing over into Calcutta again. Once I stopped to ask for a drink of water from a man who carried two cans of it slung on a long stick across his shoulders. He would not let me drink from his tin cup, but poured a little water into my cupped hands. In his face I

saw the mingled pity and disgust with which one might look upon a drunk or a beggar. I was a well-dressed beggar, to be sure, but he saw the fear in my eyes.

In the last hour of the night I found myself wandering through a wasteland of factories and warehouses, of smokestacks and rusty corrugated tin gates, of broken windows. There seemed to be thousands of broken windows. After a while I realized I was on the Upper Chitpur Road. I walked for a while in the watery light that fills the sky before dawn. Eventually I left the road and staggered through the wasteland. Not until I saw its girders rising around me like the charred bones of a prehistoric animal did I realize I was in the ruins of the hospital where I had been born.

The hole of the basement had filled up with broken glass and crumbling metal, twenty years' worth of cinders and weeds, all washed innocent in the light of the breaking dawn. Where the building had stood there was only a vast depression in the ground, five or six feet deep. I slid down the shallow embankment, rolled, and came to rest in the ashes. They were infinitely soft; they cradled me. I felt as safe as an embryo. I let the sunrise bathe me. Perhaps I had climbed into the gory chasm between Kali's legs after all, and found my way out again.

Calcutta is cleansed each morning by the dawn. If only the sun rose a thousand times a day, the city would always be clean.

Ashes drifted over me, smudged my hands gray, flecked my lips. I lay safe in the womb of my city, called by its poets Lord of Nerves, city of joy, the pussy of the world. I felt as if I lay among the dead. I was that safe from them: I knew their goddess, I shared their many homes. As the sun came up over the mud and glory of Calcutta, the sky was so full of smoky clouds and pale pink light that it seemed, to my eyes, to burn.

The Elder

Everyone told Paul and Jen that they looked alike, too much alike to be married. While he was small and skinny, with contrary-minded wings of long dark hair, and she was tall and fair, they knew that they did have the same irritating pointed nose, the same long lips that couldn't keep from smirking when they wanted to laugh at each other or themselves—which was most of the time. Afterward, they also knew that Bobby had looked nothing like either of them.

The clearest memory Paul had of Bobby was from the night they brought the Christmas tree home. The first record he had made with the other four members of his band, under the name Suncolor Graph, had plummeted flaming darkly into what one critic had called “the angst-ridden, well-deserved depths of obscurity.” The second—brighter, sharper, and not nearly as interesting to Paul—had been snapped up by pale black-clothed deathrockers and teenyboppers alike, tasted and found sugar-coated satisfying and gobbled down and comfortably digested. So this was the first Christmas that Paul, Jen, and Bobby had spent in their big old-but-new house. The lofty raftered ceiling of the living room, the softly gleaming hardwood floors that Paul and Bobby, in their stocking feet, could skate on, the picture window that looked out on what Paul thought of as his own private patch of medieval forest—his forest and Bobby's, where they were always on the lookout for wolves—all of these demanded a huge, spreading, magnificent Christmas tree full of green light and shadow.

They put it up while Bobby was taking his afternoon nap, and festooned it with the shiny hollow balls and faded filigree traditions they had each brought from their separate childhoods. “Strand by

strand,” Jen told Paul, “you are to hang the tinsel strand by strand this year.” He threw clumps of it at the high branches when she wasn’t looking. Last, they wrapped the tree with tiny fairy lights. The electric cord, red and green plastic strands entwined, made Paul think of a licorice whip.

Jen brought Bobby in, and any traces of nap-time crabbiness vanished when he saw the tree. He whispered “Pretty—*pretty*” with the uncritical amazement of a two-year-old, and the sweetness of his smile twisted Paul’s stomach a little with the fear of someday losing it. Babies’ smiles are all the sweeter because they will never be so sweet again. Bobby’s mouth fell open in wonder, a smear of wet pink on his pale skin, and his dark, dark eyebrows shot up in arcs as though they would fly away, and he stretched his tiny star hands toward the tree soaring above him in its electric glory. Paul caught one of the hands in both of his own and kissed the wriggling fingers. All the colors of the tree’s spiderweb lights speckled Bobby’s eyes.

“I don’t know if I *want* him,” Jen had said in the strange days after Bobby was born.

Those were gray, anticlimactic days for her. The birth had been tearingly difficult, and she lay flat under antiseptic hospital sheets, borne on an ocean of dull pain. The doctor told Paul that maternal ambivalence was common after bad births; Jen might go through a time of hating Bobby before she could love him. But after she said that—“I don’t know if I *want* him”—Paul didn’t want Jen to hold Bobby or nurse him. He dreamed that she had poisoned Bobby with her milk. When they brought the baby home, even after Jen had begun to show interest and, later, love, Paul was fiercely protective of his son. He watched the baby sleeping in the fussy ruffled cradle that had once held Jen, making sure the tiny chest was rising and falling in the healthy rhythm of baby sleep. He traced the graceful sweeping arcs of the eyebrows, black even then, with his lips, making Bobby frown and murmur. When the delicately etched lips parted in a sucking motion, Paul would slide the tip of his finger

into Bobby's mouth, feeling the soft wetness close around him and draw him in.

At last he let his best friends, the other band members, come to see the baby. Lally stood with his hands in the pockets of his long black jacket; he and Bobby regarded each other solemnly. Alix put out a tentative hand and touched Bobby's soft black hair with some degree of wonder, stroked it as delicately as he stroked the little golden bells on his drum set. And Zared, their insane singer, pushed his own masses of hair behind his ears and snatched Bobby out of the cradle and rolled gleefully with him on the floor, babbling in a tongue that both of them seemed to understand.

When Paul started forward in a mixture of concern and jealousy, Mark Garou put a hand on his arm. "Let them have fun. That baby isn't going to break. You might've let Jen carry him for nine months, but you're his real mother, aren't you?" Mark began to laugh. Paul turned to answer him, but looked back again, unable to take his eyes off Bobby.

When Jen cut her hair short and spiked it out like a yellow dandelion, Bobby didn't recognize her. He burrowed away from her outstretched hands into the folds of Paul's jacket, screaming with a shrillness that made Paul's heartbeat quicken and his breathing become jagged—if Bobby ever had true reason to scream like that, if he were terrified or in pain, Paul's own life would be threatened. Their beings had become inextricably entwined, like Siamese-twin serpents, like the red and green strands of the string of Christmas tree lights.

But Jen was no threat. Paul stroked Bobby's fine hair, felt the front of his jacket growing damp with tears. Something dark flitted across the plane of Jen's eyes, but was gone before it had fully shown itself.

Later, as a peace offering, she baked a tray of cupcakes. Bobby forgot that his mother had become a stranger, squawked in delight, dug his fingers into his cake and smeared the pink icing across his

round butter-cookie face. The doorbell rang—the rest of the band, probably, with their amazing cupcake radar—and Jen left the kitchen. Paul ran warm water onto a paper towel and wiped Bobby's face, kissed his nose, took a secret taste of frosting and baby spit from his chin. The thin pinkish stickiness was far sweeter than frosting alone.

Paul awoke shuddering, with tears on his cheeks, staring suddenly wide-eyed into the electric patterns that shimmered and disintegrated against the blackness of the room. It had been the worst dream he'd ever had, the only dream that had ever made him want to die. Something had hurt Bobby, had mauled him, torn him, ruined his tiny perfect body. He remembered only the final, horrible image of the dream: a stream of blood trickling from the corner of Bobby's soft mouth, Bobby's dark blue eyes looking past Paul, past pain, looking into whatever emptiness awaited him.

Jen was a deeply breathing hump, oblivious. Paul tripped over his slippers, kicked them out of the way. Down the hall, in Bobby's room, baby animals cavorted in a pastel saturnalia on the walls. A nightlight shaped like Bugs Bunny filled the room with a safe glow, illuminated the crib.

The empty crib.

Every dreadful possibility—crazed Suncolor Graph fans turned kidnappers, Paul's own childhood closet monsters, the idea that Bobby had never existed at all, had only been a figment of Paul's son-wanting imagination—went through his mind in the ten seconds it took him to realize that Bobby knew how to climb out of his crib and must be somewhere in the house (*drowned in the toilet, suffocated in the living room draperies, poisoned by a household cleanser we forgot to store out of reach*, recited the morbid litany of his mind).

He found Bobby curled up under the darkened Christmas tree, wrapped in his pink-and-blue blanket, his thumb in his mouth and his lips working sleepily around it. His other arm encircled a red package tied with a silver ribbon which contained a soft ragdoll

boy. Paul knew he should take Bobby back to bed, but instead he found himself wanting to share the coziness, the dream of sleeping under a Christmas tree. He got a checkered blanket from the closet in the hall and lay down, angling himself in among the packages, molding himself to the curve of Bobby's back. Bobby made a soft sleeping sound and nudged backward into the warmth until they were as close as a pair of spoons.

Something made a hard uncomfortable line under Paul's cheek. The electric cord of the Christmas tree lights, now lifeless, robbed of its thrumming blood. He pushed it away and nestled his face into Bobby's hair. He smelled the exotic sharpness of balsam fir, the powdery sweet scent of his son. Safe.

They slept.

"I'm going to heat up your dinner. Okay, pun-kin? Chicken and peas?"

"Chick-an-peeze!"

"You play here. I'll be back in a minute." Jen set Bobby down on the shiny wooden floor that reflected back the lights of the Christmas tree, gave him his basket of alphabet blocks, and left the room.

Paul was upstairs in the bathroom, taking a piss and making faces at himself in the mirror that covered the rear wall. Priceless knowledge for self-torture, later.

In the kitchen, Jen broke the seal on the jar of baby food, scooped the savory mush into Bobby's clown-faced bowl, and set it to heat in the microwave.

Paul flushed the toilet upstairs.

Bobby played with the big plastic blocks for a few minutes, building colored spires and toppling them ruthlessly. Bored, he left the blocks scattered across the floor and crawled under the tree, among the shiny presents. He hugged the package containing the ragdoll boy, not knowing what was inside but sharply aware that it

was something for *him*, something good. He wished he could open it now. Instead, he searched among the packages. Once he had found a candy cane there. His fingers felt something thin and pliable. He tugged at it, pulled it out from under the silver-sprinkled white bedsheet draped around the base of the tree.

Licorice whip!

Bobby laughed and pulled harder. More and more of the licorice appeared. He had never seen such wondrous candy, red and green and as long as forever. His daddy must have hidden it here for him, the way he had hidden the candy cane.

Jen set Bobby's plastic spoon and milk tumbler on the tray of his high chair.

Paul started down the stairs.

Bobby put the licorice whip in his mouth and sucked on it, then bit. It wasn't as soft as other licorice he'd had, or as sweet. He bit harder.

Just before his teeth met, he saw the Christmas tree towering above him like a huge rainbow traffic light, red and green and marvelous. Then everything turned to jagged black-and-white streaks and jittering, ripping pain, and through the hard electric haze he saw the tree falling toward him in a rush of sparkling color, but he could not open his mouth to scream.

"It's a wonder the tree was still standing," Jen said, and gave a shrill, strange laugh. Her hands went to her strand of pearls, glowing like the ghosts of babies against her black dress, and twisted. Paul stood awkwardly in his too-large suit, the same suit he had been married in. The ends of his tie hung limp against his rumpled jacket, and his hair straggled damply across his cheeks. He had been sleeping in the darkened bedroom since they had returned from the funeral two hours ago. He did not know how much longer he could bear the rancid taste in his mouth, but brushing his teeth didn't help, and getting drunk would be unbearable.

“He didn’t hurt the tree,” Jen said again, wonderingly. “All the balls are still on. The branches aren’t even scorched.” It was true. The tree stood as tall and proud as ever; the ornaments reflected the room and its two dark, soggy inhabitants in miniature like colored fishbowls; the tinsel glistened and stirred. The tree was dark; that was the only difference.

“And the way his mouth was burned, the way his tongue was ... burned, I thought—” She hitched in a great, dry sob and was silent.

“Jennifer, Jen,” said Paul. He couldn’t think of anything more to say. He knew he should go to her, hold her, give her strength and draw strength from her. But neither of them had any strength to share. Maybe she was hysterical. Maybe he should slap her. “I don’t know if I *want* him,” she had said when Bobby was born.

“You got your wish,” he said softly, and took a step toward her. Perhaps sensing his sudden, helpless fury, Jen stepped aside, giving Paul a clear view of the tree.

At the base of the tree was a frozen tableau of life. Jen had unwrapped Bobby’s presents and arranged them under the tree, among the other packages. Three plush animals—pink, blue, yellow patches, desperately bright. A tiny red rocking horse, a spidery tower of Tinkertoys. In the center of the tableau, sprawled in a heap of broken ribbons and shredded wrapping paper, was the soft ragdoll boy. He lay as if his arms and legs and his cloth back were broken, weighed down by the empty years ahead, never to be tangled in the private warmth of Bobby’s blanket, never to be anointed by the sweet wetness of Bobby’s sleeping mouth.

“If he was here—” said Jen. “If he could see, he’d want them there. Put another string of lights on, Paul, I can’t stand to see it dark—” Then it was as if all the air had suddenly been squeezed out of her. She gave a huge gagging heave and doubled over. Choking, with her arms wrapped around her stomach, she backed out of the room.

Paul picked up the ragdoll boy and tucked the limp little body under his jacket. They had stored the extra strings of lights in the hall closet. The box was on top of the checkered blanket that he and Bobby had shared, the night they had slept together under the Christmas tree. The blanket hadn't been washed. He took it too.

He looped two strings of lights carelessly around the tree, shaking branches, knocking fragile glass ornaments away. Some of them shattered on the wooden floor. Paul crunched the eggshell-thin pieces under his feet. Finally he plugged the lights in and sat on the floor, squinting his eyes to make the colors of the lights run together, trying to see the last thing Bobby had seen. The tree, far above, towering and shimmering.

Bobby's face had been marred. Streaks of dried blood were baked onto his chin, and the skin at the corners of his mouth had been charred black, and even the hairs of his eyelashes and his elegantly arching eyebrows had been burnt. But the look on his face, before the morticians with their sickly gardenia stench and their jars of orange puttylike makeup had turned it into the death-mask of a baby clown, had not been one of pain. It had been a look of wonder.

Paul wrapped himself in the blanket and curled under the tree, crushing a small present, toppling the tower of Tinkertoys. A shard of glass pierced his cheek. He didn't bother to push it away. He reached up into the branches and found what he wanted, then put it between his teeth and bit down hard. The musky sweetness of licorice filled his mouth.

Jen had been sick until her stomach ached and her throat felt scraped with rusty razors, but she could not vomit out her grief; it ripped at her insides with jagged black teeth. Paul would help her. He had to help her, otherwise she would not survive: her mind would shrink from itself and dry up, her intelligence and her sanity would plummet into a void infinitely deeper and grayer than the void she had inhabited in the days after Bobby's birth.

She came back into the living room just as the wall socket blew with a gunshot crack and a cloud of blue shock-smelling smoke drifted through the tree branches. The tree went dark again. For one everlasting second Jen saw the room in ice-clear detail—the thin pinkish fluid seeping from Paul’s mouth, the light cord now blackened like a real licorice whip, the burning ragdoll boy—and though she knew no one would hear her any more, she opened her mouth to scream as the tree began to topple.

1986

The Ash of Memory, the Dust of Desire

Once I thought I knew something about love.

Once I could stand on the roof of the tallest skyscraper in the city and look out across the shimmering candyscape of nighttime lights without thinking of what went on down in the black canyons between the buildings: the grand melodramatic murders, the willful and deliberate hurt, the commonplace pettiness. To live is to betray. But why do some have to do it with such pleasure?

Once I could look in the mirror and see the skin of my throat not withered, the hollows of bone not gone blue and bruised around my eyes.

Once I could part a woman's legs and kiss the juncture like I was drinking from the mouth of a river, without seeing the skin of the inner thighs gone veined and livid, without smelling the salt scent and the blood mingled like copper and sea-water.

Once I thought I knew something about love.

Once I thought I wanted to.

Leah met me in the bar at the Blue Shell. It was six o'clock, just before dinnertime, and my clothes were still streaked with the dill-cream soup and dijon dressing we had served at lunch. The fresh dill for the soup had come on a truck that morning, in a crate, packed secure between baby carrots and dewy lettuces. I wondered how many highways it had to travel between here and its birthplace, how many miles of open sky before the delivery man lugged it up to the twenty-first floor of the posh hotel. The Blue Shell on Twenty-one, read the embossed silver matchbooks the busboys placed on every table, referring not to avenue number but floors above street

level. Way up here they kept it air-conditioned, carefully chilled ... except in the heart of the kitchen, where no amount of circulated air could compete with the radiant heat of a Turbo Ten-Loaf bread oven. In addition to the residue of lunch, I felt sheathed in a layer of dry sweat like a dirty undershirt gone wash-gray with age.

The bar on ground floor was as cool as the rest of the hotel, though, and Leah was cool too. As cool as the coffee cream when I took it out of the refrigerator first thing every morning. For her appointment today she had dressed carefully, in the style affected by all the fashionable girls this year. Leah was one of the few who could get away with it: her calves were tight and slender enough for the clunky shoes and the gaudy patterned hose, her figure spare enough for the sheath-snug, aggressively colored (or, for a very special occasion, jet black) dresses, the planes of her face sufficiently delicate to sport the modified beehive hairdo, swept up severely in front, but with a few long strands spiralling carefully down the back. "There was a long waiting line," she told me, toying with the laces of her shoestring bodice. I imagined her sitting in one of the anonymous chairs at the clinic, hugging herself the way she did when she was defensive or less than comfortable—an unconscious gesture, I was sure. My cool Leah would never have chosen to do something that so exquisitely exposed her own vulnerability.

I was supposed to feel guilty. I was supposed to feel neglectful because I hadn't been able to get anyone to work lunch for me; thus I had sent fragile Leah into a dangerous situation unprotected, into a situation of possible pain without the male stability she craved. Something in me cringed at the accusation, as if on cue. Until now I had only sipped at the boilermaker I'd ordered; now I drank deeply, and was vaguely surprised to see it come away from my lips half-drained. The taste was good, though, the sour tangy beer washing down and the sweet mash of the whiskey lingering. Bushmill's. The kitchen staff drank free after getting off a shift, and the bar brands were damn tasty.

“They hurt me,” she said next. “I don’t see why I had to have a pelvic. Jilly didn’t have to have a pelvic when she went to her private doctor. They just tested her pee, and when they called her on the phone later, the nurse already had an appointment set up for her.”

“Jilly’s boyfriend designs software,” I told her. “Jilly can afford to see a private doctor.”

“Yes, but listen.” She spoke excitedly, mouthing her words around the various straws and skewers they’d put in her drink. She drank fruity, frothy stuff, drinks you couldn’t taste the alcohol in, drinks that more properly belonged on a dessert plate with a garnish of whipped cream. A dark red maraschino cherry bobbed against her lips. “Cleve went with me today. He says he’s got some money saved up from his last gallery show. If you help too, I’ll have enough. I can have the operation at a private doctor’s office—the clinic’s going to call and make me an appointment.” Her hand set her drink down on the bar, found mine, tightened over it.

I noticed the way she said operation before I thought of anything else. Casual, with no more pain in the twist of her mouth than if she were saying new dress or boyfriend or fuck. Like something she was used to having, that she couldn’t get used to the idea of not having whenever she wanted it. It wasn’t until my next swallow of whiskey that I registered the name she’d spoken.

“Cleve went with you?”

Again the casual twist of the lips, not quite a smile. “Yes, Cleve went. You couldn’t get off work. I didn’t feel like doing it alone.”

I remembered standing in the kitchen two days ago, slicing a carrot into rounds and then chopping the rounds into quarters. I kept my eyes fixed on the big wooden cutting block, on the knife slicing through the crisp orange meat of the carrot, but in the corner of my vision I could see Cleve twisting his battered old hat in his hands. Between his long fingers the hat was like an odd scrap of felt. Cleve’s hands were large enough to fit easily around my throat; Cleve stood a head and a half taller than me, and his arms might

have been strong enough to throw me half the length of the kitchen. But I knew he would let me kick his ass if I wanted to. If I was hurting so bad that I wanted to pound his head against the floor or punch him in the face until his blood ran, then he was prepared to let me. That was how deep his guilt went. And that was how badly he still wanted Leah.

“I can’t work for you Wednesday,” he’d told me. “Any other day I’d do it, you know that. I’ve got to see this gallery owner, it’s been set up for weeks.”

He wouldn’t meet my eyes. I thought he was just upset at the idea of me having to run the kitchen alone, having to make the thousand little decisions that go with the lunch rush while all the time I worried about Leah ... imagining her getting off the bus at the last stop before the clinic, having to walk through blocks of the old industrial district. Other parts of the city were more dangerous, but to me the old factories and mills were the most frightening places. The places where abandoned machinery sat silent and brooding, and twenty-foot swaths of cobweb hung from the disused cogs and levers like dusty gray curtains. The places that everyone mostly stayed away from, mostly left alone with the superstitious reverence given all graveyards. But once in a while something would be found in the basement of a factory or tucked into the back room of a warehouse. A head, once, so badly decomposed that no one could ever put a face to it. The gnawed bones and dried tendons and other unpalatable parts of a wino, jealously guarded by a pack of feral dogs. This was where the free clinic was; this was where certain doctors set up their offices, and where desperate girls visited them.

And while Leah was making her way through this blasted landscape, while I was slicing goat cheese for the salads or making a delicate lemon sauce to go over the fresh fish of the day, Cleve would be ensconced in some art gallery far uptown. I pictured it like the interior of a temple: lavish brocade and beaded curtains, burning cachets of sandalwood and frankincense, carpet lush and rich enough to silence even the tread of Cleve’s steeltoed cowboy boots. There Cleve would be, kicking back in some cool dim vast

room, trying to say the right things about the colorful paintings that came from some secret place in his brain, about the sculptures he shaped into being with the latent grace of his big hands. I liked the idea of Cleve bullshitting some spotless hipper-than-thou gallery owner, someone who attended the right parties to see and be seen, someone who had never been to the old industrial district or any of the rough parts of town except for a quick slummy thrill, someone who never got mustard all over his shirt or scalded his hands in hot dishwater.

But Cleve hadn't been bullshitting anyone except me.

Leah extricated her hand from mine and adjusted the hem of her skirt over her knee. Her fingernails were painted the cool blue of a blemishless autumn sky; her movements were guarded and deliberate. I caught the glimmer of her frosted eyelids, but in the semidarkness of the bar I could not see her eyes.

I took a long drink of my boilermaker. Warm rancid beer; the flat taste of whiskey settling spiderlike over my tongue.

One of Cleve's passions was his collection of jazz and blues records, most of them the original pressings. No digital technojuju or perfect plastic sound, just the old cardboard sleeves whose liner notes told the stories of entire lives. Just the battered vinyl wheels that could turn back time and rekindle desire, just the dark sorghum voices. Billie and Miles, Duke and Bird ... and more obscure ones. "Titanic" Phil Alvin, Peg Leg Howell. I had given him a bunch of them, and he knew I loved them too. One night he willed them to me over a case of Dixie beer (Cleve had made a special trip to New Orleans when the Dixie brewery finally closed, and there were still a few cases stashed in his studio closet; I had helped him drink another five or six). "Jonny, if I got jumped by a goddamn kid gang on my way home—" he paused to light a Chesterfield "—or if I walked in front of a bus or something, you'd have to take 'em, man." He gestured around the room at a series of little jewelbox watercolors he was doing at the time. "My paintings could go their own way—shit, they can take care of themselves. But you have to take the records. You're the only one who loves 'em enough."

The records were Cleve's sole big indulgence. The rest of his extra money went to buy paints and canvas and an occasional luxury like groceries. He never collected them out of any kind of anal retentiveness, any desire to possess and catalog. It was just the feel of good heavy vinyl in the hands, the fragrant dust that sifted from the corners of the dog-eared cardboard, the music that spun you back to some grand hotel ballroom where you danced beneath a crystal chandelier ... or some smoky little dive renting space in the basement of a whorehouse. The records were magic rabbit holes that led to the past, to a place where there was still room for romance. And I loved them as much as Cleve did.

And right then, in that moment at the bar as Leah withdrew her hand from mine, I could have taken a hammer and smashed the records all to bits.

We walked the four blocks from the hotel to the train tunnel half staggering, almost drunk off our one drink apiece. Leah had not eaten because of her appointment; I, after wracking my brain to concoct delicious menus day after day, could hardly eat at all. Forsaking a free dinner at the Blue Shell meant we would go to bed hungry. Our refrigerator at home was empty of all but the last parings of our life together: an old rind of cheese on the shelf, a vegetable or two that neither of us would ever cook withering in the drawer, a flask of vodka I had stashed in the freezer.

As we left the hotel behind the street grew shabbier. The buildings along here were old row houses of brick and wood, once fashionable, now unrenovated and nearly worthless. Children and teenagers sat on some of the stoops, hardness aging their faces, their grim eyes urging us past. Most unnerving were the houses that stood vacant: I could not imagine what face would look out from the dirty darkness behind the windows. Leah pulled my arm around her. I felt her skin and muscles moving under the thin dress. I thought of that strength moving with me, around me, like snakes wrapped in cool velvet. We had not had sex in three weeks, had not made love in so much longer than that. Whenever I was not with either Cleve or

Leah I imagined them together, drowning in ecstasy, dying their little deaths into each other.

Cleve had told me first, as soon as he realized that Leah didn't intend to. Away from the kitchen, away from work, in a neutral bar with a fresh beer in front of me; he confessed in a hesitant voice, telling me what a dumbfuck he was and how anyway there was only lust between them, no love, not seeing how that would hurt the worst. He bought me another beer before I finished my first one. Maybe he just wanted to know where both of my hands were.

Leah was in bed but not asleep when I went home. She'd heard me coming up the stairs and fumbling with my key, and rolled over when I came in. Some nights she slept naked; tonight she was wearing something as sheer and weightless as ectoplasm. I saw the line of her shoulder silhouetted in filmy silverwhite, somehow more erotic than the curve of her hip or breast. I sat on the edge of the bed.

"I waited up for my story," she said. It was our custom for me to tell her a tale before we fell asleep at night: sometimes just a shred of hotel gossip or a memory from childhood, sometimes a dream, one of the plans I only told her and Cleve, one of my schemes to get away from the kitchen and into a grander, larger, more leisurely world. These were made of the finest ego-spun gossamer and collapsed in the telling; nonetheless it was pleasurable to tell her, like placing a drop of my heartblood on her lips.

"I'm not telling you a story tonight," I said. "Tonight it's your turn."

She didn't move then, only looked up at me with her eyes dark in the darkness of the room: she knew I knew. And four weeks later she finally came up with a story to tell me in return for all the ones I'd given her. She was carrying a living, breathing, bloodsucking piece of meat inside her, and it might be Cleve's meat, and it might be mine.

Leah always liked to feel passive when she had sex. No, it wasn't just that she liked to: she needed to feel passive, needed to feel she was being acted upon. I could kiss her anywhere, manipulate her knees and elbows and the strong curve of her back, pretend she was a department store mannequin I was posing for some pornographic window display. She would press her face into a pillow and whimper, enjoying the power of pretended helplessness. I could dine on her tangy juices all night if I wished, I could stay inside her as long as I pleased, come when I wanted to. Only when I asked her what she wanted would Leah get angry. She had to be the little girl; she had to have someone take control.

Not on the morning of her operation. I woke in the still, stuffy light of predawn, unsure what had caused me to surface. I thought I had heard a distant sound, something separate from the intermittent cacophony of voices and sirens that punctuated the night. A train whistle miles away, or a telephone ringing in a far-off room.

Then, before I even knew Leah was awake, she sat up and in one liquid movement was straddling me. I had not felt her body close to mine in so long that it startled me into immobility. Even when I pressed up against the urgent sharpness of her nipples, up into the syrupy heat of her crotch, I wasn't ready.

She tensed above me. In the waxing light I saw surprise on her face, and faint annoyance. She began to grind against me. In the unfamiliar position I could not think how to respond. Leah hardly ever got on top—maybe five or six times in the three years we had been together. It didn't fit her penchant for being acted upon, and it played up the fact that she was almost as tall as me. She had told me that one of the things she liked best about Cleve was his bigness. His hands could enfold hers like baby birds. Her bones felt more delicate when she pressed them against the solid bulk of him.

My overactive imagination served me up plenty of Leah-and-Cleve snapshots, plenty of inevitable intimate moments, generous helpings of feverish speculation. I was helpless to push these out of my mind once they held sway, but that was not the worst thing about them. The worst thing about them was that occasionally—usually when I

was feeling low and tired and ugly—these thoughts would give me a moment of masochistic excitement.

I thought of Leah's flowerstem spine pressed flush against Cleve. I thought of him kneeling above her, his back covering hers, his big hands cupping the tender weight of her breasts. I knew Cleve preferred to fuck doggy-style. He was a confirmed butt man, loved to ride between those sweet snowy globes. I thought of him just barely entering her, the petals of her opening for him, slicking him with her juice. Cleve had a thick penis, heavily veined and solid-looking; he told me the only time a girl had blatantly propositioned him was once when he had been modelling for an art class.

Imagining it going into Leah, searching out the fruit of her heaven, I began to get hard too.

She grabbed me and then suddenly I was deep inside her. One thrust upward and I felt I was pushing at the heart of her womb. She came the way women do when they only need one good deep touch: quick and hard, with an animal groan instead of the little feathery noises she often made. I thought of the lump of meat that grew inside her, thought of bathing it with my sperm, melting away its rudimentary flesh, melting away the past few months and their caustic veneer of pain. Then I did come. The sperm didn't reach far enough: it pulsed out in long, aching spasms that flowed back down over us, into the sticky space between our thighs. The months of pain did not melt away. The lump of meat remained—it would have to be scraped away, not drowned in the seed of sorrow.

As she was pulling away from me, the telephone did ring. The noise jarred something in me, a faint, grating edge of *deja vu*: I wondered again what had woken me. Leah hunched over the receiver. "Yes," she said. "Wait—let me get something—" She grabbed a pen from the bedside table, a glossy magazine from the clutter on the floor. Her breasts hung ripe as fruit when she leaned over. She scratched something on the cover of the magazine. I rolled my head sideways on the pillow and looked. 217 *Payne Street*, she had written—the doctor's address, which the clinic wouldn't divulge

until the morning of the abortion. An address in the disused industrial district of the city.

“Thank you,” said Leah, “yes ... thank you.” Gently she placed the receiver back in its cradle. The weak light was growing brighter behind the dirty curtains. Leah got out of bed and hurried to the bathroom. I was still lying there when she came out thirty minutes later. She did not look at me. She pulled fishnet stockings the color of smoke up over her long smooth thighs, fastened a wisp of a garter belt around her waist, zipped up a sleeveless black lace shift. Then she sat on the edge of the bed and cried.

I held her hand and touched her face with all the tenderness I could summon. Her mascara did not run—some new waterproof kind, I supposed. Her lipstick was perfect. I tried to comfort her, and all I could see in my mind was Leah lying back on a stainless steel operating table, some black rubber vacuum-tube apparatus snaking up into her. Her labia were stretched wide as a screaming mouth and she was wearing nothing but the lacy garter belt and the fishnet stockings.

It was an image Cleve would have appreciated.

“Yes, Jonny, I know you try to be sweet to me. You’re a saint, Jonny. But you know what you have? Only that damned *little-boy* sweetness. You can’t take care of me. You could cook me a million gourmet dinners and when I finished them I’d still be lonely. Cleve has a special kind of sweetness—”

“I know, I know. Cleve’s sweet the way a dumb dog is sweet. You like ’em big and stupid, right?” When I was with Cleve I could not hate him. Only my arguments with Leah could convince me that Cleve had ever meant me any harm, and only then could I say cruel things about him. We had started arguing on the way to the doctor’s office. Walking through the abandoned factory district made me tense—the landscape was falling to waste, long stretches of broken glass gleaming dully here and there like quicksilver sketched onto a monochromatic gray photograph. The silence in the empty, shabby

streets seemed deafening. Leah mistook my own silence for indifference: I wasn't listening to her gloomy prattle, wasn't even thinking of the ordeal about to happen to her.

The buildings here loomed low and oppressive, blotting out the sun. Years ago this place had been a toxic hell of factories and mills. We passed smokestacks blackened halfway down their towering stalks with soot and char. We passed burned-out lots that made me think of cremation grounds. The smell of death was here too—the odor of burning crude oil is somehow as humanly filthy as the odor of corrupted flesh. These places had been abandoned over the past twenty or thirty years as the heart of the city's industry gradually moved north to the silicon suburbs. Out there you could live your whole life shuttling between a superhighway, an exit sign, a gleaming building made of immaculate silver glass, a house and a yard and a wide-screen TV and the superhighway again.

More frightening to me than the empty lots, more oppressive than the huge corrugated-steel dumpsters that overflowed with thirty years' forgotten trash, were the dead husks of the buildings. Some of them went on for blocks and blocks, and I could not help but imagine what it would be like to walk through them—endless mazes of broken glass and spiderweb and soft sifting ash, with the corners laved in shadow, with the pipes and beams zigzagging crazily overhead. I thought of a poem I had written once for some long-ago college class, in some idealistic day when the city was far away and I only cooked the food I wanted to eat. A few lines came back to me: *When the emptiness in you grows too large / You fill its vaulted chamber with the ash of memory / With the dust of desire.*

"I don't want to fight," Leah said suddenly. "There's not enough time, it's too soon. Hold me, Jonny. Help me—" She pressed me back against a wall and covered my mouth with hers. Her lips were lush, her tongue was moist and searching, and again I was reminded of loving her. Not the sterile and functional fuck this morning, but the real love we had once shared: the soft friction of skin, the good long thrusts, the liquid sounds of pleasure. But these memories were receding rapidly. Soon they would be just a point of brightness on a

dark horizon, and I knew now that they could never return. As I kissed Leah I became conscious of the rough bricks at my back, of the vast empty space behind me. I grasped her shoulders and gently pushed her away. "Come on," I said. "You can't be late. What are we looking for—Payne Street?"

She nodded, didn't speak. We kept walking. In all the blocks since we'd gotten off the train, we had only seen two or three other people: sad silent cases who walked with their heads down, who looked like they might vanish from existence as soon as they turned the corner. Now it seemed we were alone. The streets grew ever shabbier and emptier; a few of them had signs whose letters were half obliterated, spelling out cryptic messages, pointing to nowhere. None of them looked like they might have ever said Payne Street. At one corner a long spray of dirt lay across the sidewalk. Leah could not quite step all the way over it, and when we were past I saw a dark crumb stuck to the heel of her shoe. The delicate tired lines around her mouth and eyes seemed etched in dust. I began to feel that the landscape was encroaching upon her; she would leave here forever marked.

If it could erase the mark of Cleve from her, or rather the mark of her love for Cleve, then I would bless this blasted landscape. Maybe then I could love her again.

I thought I wanted to.

Soon it was obvious that we were getting to the fringes of the industrial section. The buildings here were more cramped and ramshackle. If anything walked here, it would be the wraith of a drudge worked to death in the sweatshops, dead of blood poisoning from a needle run through her finger. Or perhaps a tattered ghost, a hungry soul mangled by machinery from a time that knew no safety regulations. The sidewalk was fissured with deep cracks and broken into shards, as if someone had gone at it with a sledgehammer. I saw weeds sprouting at the edges of the vacant lots, leaves barely tinged with green, as furtive and sunless as mushrooms.

“You think the doctor’s office burned down?” I said. The look from beneath Leah’s eyelashes was pure sparkling hate. Leah disliked getting around the city, and when she had to find a place by herself, she got panicky and sometimes mean. “He said we should come out of the tunnel and turn left. It was supposed to be three blocks down past the cotton factory.”

“They had cotton *mills*, Leah, not factories, and any one of those buildings we passed could have been the one you want. By the time we walk all the way back there, we’ll be a half hour late.” A little flame of rage snapped in my chest. If she didn’t have her directions straight, and if we arrived too late, we could miss the appointment. Appointments with a private doctor who would perform this particular operation were difficult to get, so difficult that if Leah missed this chance, she might be too far along by the time she could get another.

Without a word she wheeled and started walking back the way we had come. I had to hurry to keep up with her; despite my anger, there was still the old reflexive fear that she might twist her ankle in one of the cracks or break into a run and escape from me or fall into a giant hole that would open like a mouth in the ground beneath her feet. You hold onto what you have; you do not give it up easily, even when you know it is poisoning you.

We walked quickly for a long time. Leah was sure we had turned at a certain corner; I didn’t remember, and we argued over that. Somehow she managed to bring Cleve’s name into it. “If you were with *Cleve*,” I said furiously, “you wouldn’t be bitching at him. You’d be all contrite and saying how stupid you were to get lost. You’d whine until you tricked him into taking care of you.

Leah spun on her heel. “Well, Cleve *isn’t* here, is he? He had to hang his stupid gallery show today—he couldn’t come! I’m stuck with you!”

“He was never going to go. He said you and I should go alone—said maybe that would help you decide. Make you quit stringing me along, I guess he meant.”

“Yes, that was what he said he told you. But Jonny, I was going to meet him this morning. I was going to tell you I wanted to go by myself, that I’d decided I had to do it alone. Then I was going to meet Cleve at the train station. But when I called him this morning, the bastard backed out. He decided to spend the day playing with his damned pictures.”

Only the fact that I was still somehow pitifully, stupidly in love with Leah allowed me to do what I did then. I turned and ran from her. If I had stayed I could not have kept my fingers from round her throat; in my head I would have been choking her and Cleve at once. Never mind the total illogic of it; never mind that both Leah and Cleve knew I would never have let her go off alone; never mind that I did not really believe Cleve would betray me so completely, not even for Leah, not even though I knew he was pitifully in love with her too. Something had waked me up this morning at the first pale light of dawn; it could have been a cry down in the street, or a jet plane arrowing through the smog far overhead. Or it could have been Leah murmuring into the phone, cursing her conspirator in a whisper when she realized he wasn’t coming. Then replacing the receiver ever so gently—wanting to slam it down—and flowing over on top of me. Making love to me to spite Cleve, even if only in her head.

I had the spreading cancer of jealousy in me; it had been eating away inside me for a long time. Now at last I thought I was in its death throes, suffering its final agony. And, like any dying man, I tried to run from it.

We had already lost the way we had come by. Now I ran deeper into the maze of streets, not looking or caring which way I went. For a few moments I sprinted, desperate to get away, wanting nothing but to run and run. Then the sound of Leah’s heels ticking frantically behind me began to slow me down, began to pull me back to here and now and what I thought I wanted. I walked fast, jogging when she got too close, not letting her catch up with me but not completely losing her. I was afraid I might never find her again; I was afraid of having nothing to crawl back to.

Then I turned a corner and didn't look over my shoulder soon enough. When I did glance back, Leah was gone.

I froze. How could I have lost her, not meaning to? I waited a few seconds to see if she might follow. If I ran back around the corner and she was still coming, my game would be up—it would be as good as admitting that I hadn't wanted to run away at all. But if she'd gotten disgusted and started back to the train station, I had to catch her. I had to get her to that appointment if I still could. If she needed dragging there, I would drag her.

I came around the corner and the sidewalk was empty. For a moment I vacillated between anger and the stark terror of abandonment. But farther up the street, at the mouth of a narrow alleyway, I saw a smudge on the sidewalk—darker than the drifting ash, and shiny. I walked back to it. The smudge on the sidewalk was blood, twin patches of it ground into the cement. A few feet away, half hidden beneath a blackened flake of newspaper, lay a tube of scarlet lipstick.

Leah had tripped over her heels, fallen, spilled her purse, skinned her knees brutally on the broken sidewalk. But where had she gone after that? I looked down the alleyway. No one there. Nothing—

—except a sign.

I hadn't seen it at first. No one walking quickly past would have noticed it; it had been placed only three or four feet up the wall, at waist level instead of eye level. And it was so faded, the edges of the letters seeming to blend into the dusty brick, that it could hardly be read. But I imagined Leah sitting up after her fall, her smoky fishnets torn and the raw ganglia of her kneecaps screaming, her eyes filling with tears. She would have sat there for a moment, dazed, not quite able to get up. And the sign might have caught her eye.

Pain Street, it said.

The alleyway led between two empty factory buildings.

Suddenly the sky seemed too wide and bright and heavy, the silence too big. A fragment of sidewalk shifted under my foot. I saw

little drifts of refuse piled against either wall of the alley—soot and ash, more bits of charred paper, the razor confetti of broken glass. I did not know if I could set foot in the alley; I did know, however, that I could not go home alone.

One wall was blank and featureless all the way to the back of the alley, where more trash was heaped. At my approach a bottle rolled lazily down but did not shatter. I thought I had walked into a cul-de-sac until I came to the end of the alley. There, set back in an alcove of crumbling mortar, was a heavy steel door wedged open with half a brick.

Someone had taken a nail or a shard of glass and scratched the number 217 on the door.

The door made a gritty ratcheting noise as I pulled it open, but there was no trash in front of it, and the hinges swung easily. Someone had opened it before me. I paused for a moment, drinking in what little dirty sunlight managed to filter into the alley. Then I stepped inside. It was easy. Leah always led me to the places I feared most, and I always followed.

The air inside the building was as cool and dim and stagnant as a sarcophagus. In the dark rafters and pipes of the ceiling it hung like a cloud of bats waiting to fly, rustling their parchment wings, exuding their arid spice smell. The ash of memory, I thought dreamily, the dust of desire. Walking in this air was like moving through a syrup of fermented ages; the silence in here could wrap you up like cloth and preserve you for a thousand years. As my eyes adjusted to the light, shapes began to resolve themselves around me: a huge mesh of Geigeresque machinery, cogs hanging in the air like dull toothy moons, rubber belts and hoses gone brittle with dust, steel spires soaring up to the apex of the great vaulted chamber. And a row of hooks as long as my leg, sharp metal hooks that looked oddly organic, as if they should be attached to the wrist-stump of some enormous amputee.

I walked a few steps into the chamber, and my foot punched through something dry and papery. A giant vegetable bulb, I

thought, like onions and shallots kept too long in a root cellar, rotten and desiccated from the inside. Not until I pulled my foot back did the fragile ribcage crumble, collapsing the swollen shell of the belly and exposing the scrimshaw beadwork of the spine.

A younger woman than Leah, almost a child, half buried and half dissolved into the grime and ash of the factory floor. Most of the face was gone. I saw scattered teeth gleaming in the dust like fragments of ivory. But the curve of the cheekbone—the tiny hand—surely she could not yet have been sixteen. And I wondered why she had come at all, with the once-ripe swell of her belly; she had been too far along in her pregnancy to have hoped to live through an abortion.

I could go no further. I could not walk that gauntlet of machinery, not even to find Leah. I could not turn my back on it either. I stood over the husk of the young girl, and the machinery stretched out mutely as far as I could see, and time hung motionless inside the old factory, not disturbed by me or Leah or anything in the city. It seemed impossible that just a few miles away the trains were still running, the drugs were still changing hands, the endless frantic party went on as if time could not be stopped.

Very nearby, magnified by furtive echoes, I heard the click of a high heel.

“Leah,” I called, not knowing if I hoped to save her or if I wanted her to save me. “Leeeeah—” When she walked into the far end of the chamber, I could no longer be ashamed of the pleading note in my voice. Her face was smeared with tears and makeup. The blood from her scraped knees had begun to cake, gluing her torn stockings to her legs. Her face twisted with relief and she started toward me, her arms out as if in supplication. In that moment Cleve might never have touched her, never have tasted her. We might have gone home together, might have slept in each other’s arms again. I might have rested my cheek on the burgeoning mound of her belly, and found peace.

Then the machinery kicked on.

It had not been used in a long time, long enough to let the young girl fall away nearly to bare bones, and it filled the air with dust as thick as whipped cream. Only dimly did I see the first hook lifting Leah up and away from me, as if she had raised her arms and flown. I stood there dumbly for several minutes, unable to grasp what had happened even as her blood fell upon my face and my outstretched hands. A high-heeled shoe dropped to the floor in front of me, missing my head by an inch. I did not move. I stared up, up at the swirling clouds of dust, up at the figure that hung suspended like an angel in black lace. When the dust cleared Leah was slumped over limp, her head hanging upside down, her hair like a bright banner in the dusk of the room. The hook had punched into her back and out through the soft flesh of her abdomen, but her face was perfectly calm. I was calm, too, an absolute calm like the equilibrium of particles in a solution. Should I have been frightened? Perhaps. But somehow I knew that even if I walked up to one of the machines and touched it, I would not be hurt. They did not want me.

The metal of the hook was beaded with bright blood. On its sharp tip was a thick goblet, darker than the rest and more solid-looking. It looked like nothing but a piece of meat—meat that had ceased to live or breathe or suck.

I no longer thought I knew something about love.

Now I knew what love was all about.

I have described the scene to Cleve as well as I could, and asked him to paint it for me. When he has captured it as closely as possible in the jewelled watercolor tones that he loves—the soft gray dust, the banner of her hair, the red so clear and vital it hurts the eye to see it—he will mat and frame it and we will hang it on the wall.

Cleve's work has become somewhat fashionable among the gallery crowd, and he has begun getting shows uptown, where the art patrons don't think they've gotten their money's worth unless they pay upwards of five hundred for a piece. We have both cut

back to halftime at the Blue Shell. Whenever we have a night off we try to work our way through the last of the Dixie beer, and we listen to Sarah Vaughn or Mingus or Robert Johnson, and when the music ends we sit and stare at each other, and a thousand secrets pass between our eyes.

I hate to look in the mirror. I hate to see the beginnings of an old man's face. I hate the loose skin of my throat and the hollows around my eyes. But I know what Leah's eyes must look like by now.

Sometimes we talk about magic.

In a city of millions, an ancient city overcrowded and mean enough, a kind of magic could evolve.

"Ancient" by American standards isn't very old. Two or three hundred years at most ... and the abandoned mills and factories are no more than sixty years old. But I think of New Orleans, that city mired in time, where a whole religion evolved in less than two hundred years—a slapdash recipe concocted of one part Haitian graveyard dust, one part juju from the African bush, a jigger of holy communion wine, and a dash of swamp miasma. Magic happens when and where it wants to.

In a great, cruel, teeming city, one could create one's own magic ... intentionally or otherwise. Magic to fulfill desires that should remain buried in the deepest pit of the soul, or just to get through the desperate hustle of staying alive from day to day. And out of the desperation, out of the hunger for bread or love, out of the secret hard bright joy at the madness of it all—out of these things something else could be born. Something made of bad dreams and lost love, something that would use as its agent the abandoned, the forgotten, the all-but-useless.

The obsolete engines, the rusted cogs ... and the steel hooks that stay honed sharp and shiny. The machinery of a forsaken time.

The love that no one wanted any more.

I go up to the roof of Cleve's building and I look out over the city, and I think about all the power waiting to emerge from its black

womb, and I wonder who else will tap into this homegrown magic,
and I howl into the wind and rejoice at the emptiness within me.

And nowhere else on the horizon have I ever seen so many
billions of lights ... or so many patches of darkness.

1990

Poppy Z. Brite's first novel, *Lost Souls*, was nominated for Best First Novel of 1992 by the Horror Writers of America and for the Lambda Literary Award. Her second novel, *Drawing Blood*, was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award and the Bram Stoker Award. Her short stories have appeared in numerous anthologies. She lives and writes in New Orleans.



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